

# Sam Botha

by  
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**This is a work of fiction. None of the characters or events portrayed are real.**

*Sam has settled into a comfortable routine, he lives alone, and has just enough work to keep him busy, but still have enough time to enjoy the writing he does for his own entertainment and pleasure. Despite being a skilled project planner, he doesn't believe in planning for the future...*

## Ghosts Past

Sam was startled when he recognised Helen. It had been twenty years since he has seen her last, on the other side of the world. She appeared not to have noticed him, but he was certain it was her. She looked good, he thought, and he wondered what she was doing at Partington & Simms.

He shrugged and got into his car. It had been a busy morning and he still had a lot to do.

He completed the last drawing late that night, printed off a series of views from different angles and checked them carefully before sending an electronic copy to Reg Simms and copying it to his PA, Christine. He checked the time, twenty past eleven, and decided to go for a run to clear his mind.

By the time he had warmed up he was remembering Helen; more specifically the day when she had told him that she could not envisage a life with him.

“Of course I love you Sam, and always will,” she had said, “But you aren't the man for me. It's not your fault and there is

absolutely nothing wrong with you Sam. It is me; I have expectations, plans and well... ambitions, and being a soldier's wife is not one of them."

Sam had not known what to say, he remembered feeling as if his intestines had been torn out. He could not remember much of the rest of that night; his and Helen's joint 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebrations. They had booked half the dining room at the Ridgeway Hotel. Sam hadn't returned to Zambia since his parent's funeral two years earlier, and had a lot of catching up to do with his friends. He did remember Gail, Helen's older sister, telling him that Helen was a bloody idiot. He bought himself a ticket to Capetown the next day, blowing the money he had saved for the engagement ring and party. When he returned to barracks three weeks later, he was still not able to talk about it.

Helen wrote a few times. Sam read and replied to the letters hoping that Helen had changed her mind, but they were just news and by the end of the year, the letters had stopped. Sam returned to Zambia two years later when his posting to Germany ended, and sold the farm. The Carters invited him for Sunday lunch and got him to do some repairs on their roof and their aged Nissan Patrol. Gail and her husband had moved to Australia and Claire, Helen's mother, seemed to delight in telling Sam how well Helen was doing, rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous in London as she made her way up the corporate marketing ladder. Neville, as usual, said very little and drank too much. Sam wondered if he was still alive.

Sam showered and fell asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow that night. By five the following morning he was on the A27 heading for Colchester, Helen was far from his thoughts as he prepared himself for what he thought might be an awkward meeting with an old colleague he hadn't seen for years. He arrived at the Premier Inn in time for breakfast and left his bag at reception while he walked through Castle Park.

Dominic was waiting at the Castle entrance. Sam would probably not have recognised him if he hadn't been looking for him. Time had not been kind to Dominic.

"Sam!" Dominic greeted him with a big smile, "Can't believe it has been eight years! Where does it go?"

"Scary isn't it?" replied Sam as they punched fists, "Are we going in or just meeting here?" He nodded towards the Castle.

"No... No time for that just yet, I have a team waiting for you. It's not far, I just thought this would be a good place to meet and give us time for a brief chat before you meet the others," said Dominic, his cheeks reddening a bit. "I wanted to clear the air... Make sure there is no bad blood between us."

Sam smiled, "Really Dom? After eight years? Who holds a grudge that long?"

Dominic shrugged, "We were mates, I felt bad... but you know what they say about Love and War?"

Sam smiled and shook his head, "Well I'm glad you felt bad, but I moved on. Life is too short for regrets. I hope you and Alison were happy together. How long did it last?"

Dominic turned to look at Sam, a surprised look on his face, "We're still together, married, three kids; Conrad, Candice and Cindy, seven, five and three."

"Well that makes it so much better. Congratulations Dom," said Sam, "So, tell me why you want me on this project?"

"You are good," said Dominic, "And ex-REME, so getting security clearance was easy."

Crown and County Developers' offices were literally a few hundred yards away in the Culver Street Centre, which had changed a lot since the last time Sam had been there.

There were six people already in the conference room, coffee, tea and biscuits were ready and Dominic asked someone to fetch the others while he poured coffee into a mug with the Crown and County Developers logo on it in blue and gold. Sam didn't recognise anyone else in the room.

A tall man with a military bearing coughed into his hand and asked them to take their seats. He looked annoyed as four more people came in and closed the door behind them.

"I think everybody is here now," he said, "Before the presentation I think we should introduce ourselves for the benefit of those who are not CCD. I am John Banks, the operations director for the project. Welcome to you all, and especially those that have travelled some distance to get here." He pulled out a chair and sat in it, before turning to the person on his right, "Why don't you introduce yourself Larry, and we will go around the table; keep it brief?"

Larry, a balding, overweight man nodded, "I am Larry Sharp, the architect for this project, please call me Larry?"

They went around the table, none of the names were familiar to Sam, apart from Dominic's who was the project manager for the project. A young man, who had introduced himself simply as "Stewart, an Intern," handed out folders containing a brief description of the building project and a brochure. Sam had already received a pdf version of everything in the folder. There was also a CCD branded ball point pen and an A4 notepad. Sam listened to the presentation, making notes of key dates and the names of individuals responsible for departments. John Banks kept things moving and by twelve the meeting was over. He asked Sam, Larry and Dominic to remain behind and sent Stewart to get more coffee and some water.

As soon as the door had closed behind the intern he looked at Sam and spoke, “Mr. Botha, thank you for coming here. I feel I need to explain that your presence is not altogether welcomed by certain factions within CCD, but some of our shareholders asked that you be retained as a consulting project planner. I believe you know Dominic Paulson our Project Manager?”

“Please call me Sam,” said Sam, “Yes, Dominic and I were both stationed here in Colchester at Eight Field Workshop for four years, and we had spent the year before that working together in the REME School of Electronic Engineering.”

“Excellent!” said John Banks, “Well, I hope that will help, I just wanted to spell it out to the three of you that you need to cooperate. CCD can not afford any mistakes, that is why we have Sam running his plan separately. It is not about trust, it is about trying to ensure that we have sufficient oversight to anticipate problems as quickly as possible. If any of you run into any obstacles call me directly, day or night.” He slid a business card across the table to Sam.

He turned to Dominic, “Have you found a suitable office for Mr... Sam?” he asked, “He can have Stewart as an assistant for the duration.”

Dominic looked flustered but rallied, “Yes, but there is only one desk... and no room for a second desk...”

“Let’s have a look shall we?” said John Banks getting to his feet and looking at his watch, “I have a few minutes before lunch.”

They went down three floors, Dominic tried not to look defensive when he indicated the office. It had probably been a store room. It had been cleaned, and still smelled of disinfectant. John Banks surveyed the room in silence, then nodded and removed a cell phone from his pocket, he frowned at the screen.

“Well, there does not seem to be any signal down here; that won’t do. Follow me.” He headed for the stairs and went up six floors and held the landing door open for Sam, “Well, you seem to have kept yourself fit Sam,” he said smiling, then called down the stairwell to tell Larry and Dominic that they were on the fifth floor.

He walked briskly along the corridor and stopped outside a double door marked Technical Services, “Would you mind waiting out here Sam?” he asked, “Bring Dominic and Larry in when they arrive?”

Larry and Dominic were sweating and looking uncomfortable when they arrived. Larry glared at Sam as he pushed the doors open and went into the brightly lit corridor. There were six large offices there, three on either side. John Banks was holding the door of the last office on the right open and talking into his cell phone. Two young men were busy carting files and computers out of the office and putting them into the open elevator at the end of the corridor.

“Patrick and Michael have kindly offered their office to Sam,” said John Banks, taking his phone away from his ear and holding it against his chest, “And Stewart is on his way with Scott from Facilities. We’ll have this office ready for you by the time you get back from lunch Sam. Why don’t you take Sam to Café Med, Dominic, and catch up on old times?”

Dominic didn’t talk much as they headed back down the stairs and out into the Culver Centre. Sam got himself a cheese and tomato baguette and a large bottle of water, while Dominique spoke apologetically into his phone, his back towards Sam, clearly not wanting him to hear. Sam took a table outside and browsed through a freebie newspaper that had been left on the table. Dominic was looking more composed when he sat at the table.

“So what do you think?” he asked, “Now that you have met the team?”

Sam shrugged, “Same as usual I guess, it’s a job.”

“For you it is a job, for me it is my career,” said Dominic, “I don’t want you making a fool of me here Sam.”

Sam nodded, “When have I ever done that Dominic?” he asked quietly, “My job is to help CCD get their project built on time and in budget. As long as you plan to do the same thing, there is no conflict of interest here.”

“So you aren’t going to try and make me look like a cunt in front of my boss and colleagues?” asked Dominic.

“Do you really think I would do that because you lied to Alison, telling her that I was engaged to someone else, so that she would dump me for you?” asked Sam, “...You actually do, don’t you? Christ Dom, get over yourself.”

Sam tuned out Dominic when his food arrived. He wondered how Dominic’s self esteem had fallen so low and told himself that he really didn’t care. Dominic had already shot himself in the foot by allocating Sam a damp basement broom cupboard as an office. A waiter brought Dominic a thick slice of chocolate cake smothered in cream and a tall coffee-coloured milkshake. Sam excused himself and said he needed to stretch his legs.

“I’ll make my own way back to the office Dom,” he said. Dominic nodded but said nothing. His mouth was full.

It took Sam two days to set up his preliminary project plan. Stewart, the intern, was quick and capable. Sam had no problems getting his Mac connected and the IT guys who had given their office up for him readily provided him with two wide screen monitors, a laser printer and even brought him an A0 pen plotter.

He visited the site early on the Thursday and introduced himself to the main contractor, the site foreman and the QS. He had already spoken to them on the phone while setting up the plan. He had not had any physical contact with Larry or Dominic since the first day, though they had passed on all the information he had requested from them through Stewart.

The Quantity Surveyor, a quietly spoken Scottish woman, Ziggy, offered to show Sam around the site.

“So you are the trouble-shooter that CCD brought from London are you Samuel?” she asked, “Are they expecting trouble?”

“Please call me Sam or Samson,” said Sam, “No, that must be some other fellow, I am just a contracted project planner from Chichester. Abbey Field is an important project for CCD, and they had some bad publicity over the purchase of the land, so they will not want any more surprises. Is there anywhere I can get a decent coffee here?”

Ziggy nodded and led him around the plant bay and through the new gate. A mobile café was parked in a section of road that had been cut off by the project. A cheerful looking woman grinned at Ziggy and asked who her new boyfriend was.

“Away with you Maggie, this is Sam, from CCD,” replied Ziggy, “Coffee for both of us please?”

The woman winked at Sam, and turned away to do the coffee.

“Het jy koeksusters, juvrouw?” asked Sam in Afrikaans, causing the woman’s head to whip around.

“Vraagtig! ‘n Boer!” she exclaimed.

“Not a proper one,” said Sam, “That’s about the extent of my Afrikaans.”

Maggie laughed, “Shame man, and you sound so English. Sorry, we don’t have Koeksusters, but I can make some for Monday if you like?”

Ziggy recommended the egg and bacon sandwich. It was excellent. Maggie and her partner Anne, were from Zimbabwe and South Africa respectively. They had met at Capetown University as students, then went their separate ways, married, had children, divorced, moved to UK and bumped into each other at Kew Gardens, and decided to hitch up and live together. Maggie was very chatty, while Anne seemed quite reserved.

Sam was well prepared for the presentation on Friday. He and Stewart were in the conference room checking the connection to the projector before anyone else arrived. There were several new faces at the presentation. John Banks asked Dominic to begin. Dominic started with a Gantt chart showing time lines and gave a clear and succinct explanation of what was shown. He answered the half dozen questions smoothly and then sat down.

John Banks then explained that senior management had asked an independent contractor to do a parallel project plan using different software so that there was twice the scope for anticipating potential problems. He asked Sam to give his presentation.

Sam projected his Project Evaluation and Review Technique chart, talked them through it, and pointed out the critical path. He explained how the PERT would evolve and demonstrated how it could be used as a forecasting tool. The end date according to Sam’s PERT chart was not markedly different to Dom’s; both indicated completion in September 2023, Dom’s said 21 September while Sam’s was 15 September.

There were more questions after Sam's presentation, most of which Sam answered. He did not even attempt to answer when he was asked to justify the need for the additional cost in employing him. John Banks took that.

"Sam's fees and associated costs will be paid by the investors that insisted on his participation, and the divvying up is a matter for the investment board to deal with and outside the scope of this meeting," he said, "If there are no further questions...?"

The meeting closed shortly after that and John Banks asked Sam to remain behind.

"Well Sam," he asked when they were alone, "What's your feeling about this? Any problems or reservations?"

"It is early days, John, but I think it will work out well. The contractor seems competent. I do have one small issue that you might want to think about?" said Sam, "Meetings. Generally I think they are best avoided, especially those meetings where operational managers and staff are called away from their stations. I will be updating the project plan every single week day. That requires me to communicate with the people doing the work. I need to do it as efficiently as possible without interfering with them, so that they can get on with their work. Things tend to go wrong on sites when the site foreman and section supervisors are not there keeping an eye on things."

John looked at Sam and frowned, "CCD likes meetings," he pointed at the CCTV cameras, "They think it improves accountability, but I see your point. What would you say to limiting attendance; say just you, me, Dominic, Larry and a representative from Callaghan Construction? Once a week?"

"That works for me," said Sam, "I will share my daily data sheets with Dominic, so we are all working with the same data."

John nodded, “Excellent. Will you be returning to Chichester for the weekend?”

Sam shook his head, “No, not for a while. I still have a lot to do here.”

Dominic was waiting for Sam in Reception. “Do you have time for a pint at the Castle Arms?” he asked. “Larry and some of the lads have gone ahead.”

“Thanks for asking me Dominic,” replied Sam, “I’m not much of a drinker, never was, and I’ve arranged to look at some digs. Have a great weekend.”

Sam walked to Maggie and Anne’s house, it only took fifteen minutes. Anne answered the door and told him that Maggie had popped out to the shops. She showed him the room, it was an attic conversion and very nicely done. There were two single beds in it and it had a shower and toilet. Maggie arrived while he was up there and came up.

“So what do you think?” she asked, “We normally charge thirty pounds a night, but if you take it long term, we’ll give you a discount.”

“I like it,” said Sam, “And thirty pounds a night is fine with me. I might be here eighteen months, but I am only on monthly contracts, so I could be gone after a month. Call it thirty a night for now anyway. I can pay a month in advance, if you give me bank details I will transfer the money tonight. Can I move in tomorrow?”

“Sure, Anne will sort out the payments with you. Would you like to stay for supper, it’s fish? We’re Catholics,” Maggie laughed as she went down to get on with supper.

Sam followed Anne downstairs to a tiny office where she printed him off their bank details. He asked if he could use the

desk and used his laptop to log into his account and transfer a thousand pounds into their account. Ann offered him a drink while he waited for supper and interrogated him gently.

“What made you come to UK, Sam? Have you been here long?” she asked.

Sam told her his tale, of joining the British army straight after school, and training as a technician and leaving after nine years and working for Motorola for seven years before deciding to do his own thing. Sam enjoyed the supper and Maggie and Anne’s banter and was tempted to stay the night when Maggie suggested it, but decided that he needed a very long walk after supper. He left his laptop and knapsack in his new room and had a two hour walk and got back to the Premier Inn just after midnight.

The following morning Sam checked out of the Premier Inn, dropped his bags off at his lodgings and then parked his car in the CCD basement carpark. He had intended to spend the day in his CCD office transferring Larry’s drawings to a SketchUp model, but decided to do that at his lodgings instead, using the two large monitors he had brought from Chichester.

He had the house to himself as Maggie and Anne were out with their catering caravan.

By five PM he had the floor plan done. It wasn’t part of his brief to do a 3D Model of the project, but he liked using SketchUp and had found that drawing the building in 3D gave him a better feeling for the project, and often helped him to find problems before the builders reached them. He had already identified several potential problems with the project. He closed down his computer and went for a run.

Maggie and Anne were busy preparing for a Sunday Fete when he got back. He declined food but accepted a coffee while he helped, buttering bread for toasted sandwiches, and then went

up to his room and spent another four hours on 3D modelling. He went for another run before breakfast, and by midday felt he had done enough computer modelling. He sent an email to Larry, explaining the issues he had found, taking some time over the wording to try and avoid denting Larry's ego, then decided to go for a walk. He had lunch at Café Med and stayed there for a couple of hours writing on his iPad mini.

There was a kerfuffle outside the Café; three young lads hurling abuse at each other and a bit of fisticuffs. The lads ran off shortly before the police arrived, but the noise had thrown Sam's concentration so he finished his cold coffee, paid and left. He walked back to his lodgings and found Maggie and Anne off-loading their van, and chipped in with that. They were both tired but cheerful after a successful day. Anne brought up a glass of wine and some cheese and biscuits for Sam and thanked him for his help. He wrote till ten PM and had a really good night's sleep.

Sam was up and running at five on Monday morning, and in his office going through the day's schedule with Stewart at eight. He got an email from Christine at Partington & Simms asking for an address she could courier a package to him from Reg Simms and asked her to send it to the Colchester UPS Access point on North Station road for him to collect. Sam generally found Monday mornings quite slow in project planning, and this was no exception. At ten he got a brief acknowledgement from Larry to his email, and shortly after that he got a message to say the package from Partington and Simms would be ready for collection at 12:00.

Sam was on site at two with Stewart; he wanted to show Stewart how to get information on work progress without irritating the contractors. Ziggy accompanied them. Sam asked her if she would like a PERT Chart of the project, suggesting he could print off a chart once a week showing the progress of the project. He had already agreed to send her an electronic version every week.

They were back at the office by five, and Sam collected Reg Simms package from UPS on the way. He updated the project before leaving that night, and changed into his running gear and ran for an hour before returning to his lodgings.

He spent an hour making the changes that Reg wanted to the model he had done and emailed the modified drawing to him and copied it to his PA. He then spent another hour adding detail to the CCD project SketchUp model before settling down into an armchair with his iPad and writing some more. By ten PM he had had enough of the day and went to bed.

There was a note on his door at CCD asking him to attend a meeting in the conference room at nine AM. There was no sign of Stewart. Sam printed off his data sheets and headed for the conference room, getting there fifteen minutes early. He sat at the table sending SMS update requests until the meeting started with Dominic clearing his throat.

Sam was surprised at how many people were at the meeting, recognising six of the contractor's supervisors from the project including Ziggy. Dominic went on for a while, telling them the status of the project and highlighting the concern areas, before asking them, individually, for a progress report. It took two hours. John Banks was waiting outside the Conference room when they emerged, he asked Dominic, Larry and Sam to come to his office.

He asked them to sit and perched on the edge of his desk facing them, "Thank you for coming gents, there are a couple of issues I want to deal with now. Dominic and Larry, you are both CCD employees and are aware that our financial situation is not as good as we would like it to be, the pandemic hit us hard, but did not hit our competitors as badly. Put simply, we are not doing our jobs as well as we should be..." he looked at each of them in turn, it seemed to Sam that he was sending a message to Dominic and Larry, they both looked slightly indignant.

“I have just got off the phone with Steven McCall at Callaghan Construction... He was less than impressed to find that six of his key supervising personnel were summoned here for a progress meeting. They are called supervisors and managers because they are supposed to supervise and manage their staff doing the building work we are paying them to do. From now on, there will be one meeting a week, and Callaghan will send one person here to represent them. You can decide when the meeting is. I would suggest Monday mornings, but will go with whatever you three agree. You need to find a way to get your information that does not interfere with the people doing the work on site. I do not know how you are getting the daily updates that you send me with your updated PERT chart, Sam, but Steven McCall says you have not been a nuisance on site... Now, any questions?”

Neither Dominic or Larry seemed inclined to ask any questions. Sam raised his hand and spoke, “I would suggest Friday morning is a good time for progress meetings; I like having the weekend to mull things over, but I will go with whatever Larry and Dominic prefer.”

Dominic and Larry both nodded and said they were happy with Friday meetings.

“I am sorry to say that Stewart, the Intern, will not be returning to the office Sam. I will try to get a replacement for you, but I do not know how soon that will be,” John told him.

“Thank you for telling me, but that is quite OK, I can manage without an assistant quite easily,” replied Sam.

“I am sure of it,” said John, “If you could excuse us now, there are some issues I need Larry and Dominic to help me with. Thank you for your time, Sam.”

There was a message from Christine on Sam's phone when he next checked it. A photo of a bottle of Ron Zacapa; Reg Simms must have been happy with the changes Sam had made. He updated the Abbey Fields PERT and set off to the site to get a couple more updates and check for himself on progress. Ziggy had coffee and a sandwich with him at M&A's caravan.

"I heard there were fireworks at CCD after this morning's meeting," she said quietly, "Your beard doesn't look too badly singed."

Sam smiled and shook his head, "I think I am allergic to meetings," he said, "I always was, but these days, in this connected world, why bother?"

Ziggy nodded, "Aye, and guess who is going to have to attend your meetings from now on in? Me... what did I do to deserve such punishment?"

"You volunteered for it when you decided to be a QS," said Sam smiling.

"What happened to your shadow?" asked Ziggy, "Is he sick?"

"I have no idea," admitted Sam, "I was just told that I would not be seeing him again."

They walked around the site doing their checks and Sam left Ziggy dealing with a delivery driver who wasn't sure where to offload.

By five he had updated the PERT and printed off a copy for Ziggy. He changed into his running kit and dropped the PERT at the site office then ran for an hour.

Maggie and Anne arrived home while he was showering. Maggie sounded annoyed about something, but seemed cheerful enough when she knocked on his door and asked if he

would be wanting supper, and told him it was included in the price of his room when he said he didn't usually eat a meal at night.

By the time he went to bed that night Sam had done all the detail he intended to do on the CCD Project model and had two potentially major problems to investigate. He woke at four and found himself over-thinking the two problems. He got up and went for a long run.

Anne suggested at breakfast that they make him a pre-packed lunch to take to work each day if he was not going to eat supper.

“Why don't you eat supper,?” asked Maggie, frowning at him over her coffee, “It's not like you are overweight or anything. Perhaps you are scared of being stuck between two dykes at the table when we have had a glass of wine or two too many?”

Sam laughed, “I run most days to keep my weight down,” he said, “I got up to a hundred and thirty kilos when I left the army. I don't want to go back there.”

## **Spite**

The security guard at CCD asked Sam to come to the basement with him when he got to the office the following morning. All four tyres of his Saab had been slashed and “fuck off cunt” was gouged into the paint work, damaging all the panels except the roof. Sam's heart sank. He looked around and saw three cctv cameras. The security guard said they were being checked.

Sam photographed the damage with his phone and went up to his office feeling depressed. He printed off the data sheets and took them to Café Med, where he had a cappuccino and slice of lemon meringue pie while he sent off update requests. He sent a message to his insurance company with photographs of

the damage on his vehicle telling them where it was. They asked for a police report. He walked back to CCD and asked the security guard if they had informed the police. The security guard said they had and that the police were on their way. He also said that there was no CCTV coverage of the incident. It appeared that power to the system had been turned off while the damage was being done. He said he would call Sam when the police arrived.

Sam updated the project plan and was about to head to site when he got a call from security to say the police had arrived.

The police officer did not look overly interested. He asked Sam a few questions and then used the Saab's boot to fill in a form. He took a couple of photos and asked to see the CCTV footage. He seemed unsurprised when the security guard said there was none; that power had been turned off to the cameras from nine PM to nine thirty and that the damage was visible after nine thirty and not before nine. The other two vehicles in the basement had not been damaged and nobody had entered the basement till seven thirty in the morning when the MD's PA had come in. She had reported the damage to Sam's car.

The police officer asked to be shown where the power switches were for the camera system. They were in the security office itself. The night officers had not reported any power outages. Sam saw that there was a cctv camera in the security office and asked to see the footage for that camera. The security officer said he did not have access to the security room surveillance camera, but said that the CCD facilities officer did have. He was not at work, having reported in sick.

Sam felt a message arrive on his phone. It was from John Banks asking him to come up to the top floor.

He was met at the door by a handsome and smartly dressed woman who seemed to know who he was and introduced herself as Elaine.

“I saw your car was vandalised when I came in this morning, Douglas wants to speak to you about it,” she said, “I am so sorry that this has happened.”

Sam shrugged and thanked her and followed her to a large corner office. He smelled freshly brewed coffee as she opened the door. John Banks was sat in an armchair looking grim, a stocky man had his back to Sam as he worked an espresso bar.

“Ah, there you are... it has been a long time Sergeant Botha,” said the man turning and smiling at Sam, “I hope you still like coffee?”

Sam recognised the voice before he recognised the face, “Major Worth?” he asked, “It’s been ten years I think?”

“Well, I got to full colonel, mainly thanks to you, but it’s just Mr. Worth now, please call me Douglas, may I call you Sam?”

“Please do,” said Sam, accepting the coffee and then shaking the proffered hand. He had only met Major Worth once in the four years he had reported to him, but they had spoken often on the phone.

“Please take a seat Sam, I’m sorry about your car,” said Douglas Worth, “It seems you have rattled a few cages just by being here.”

Sam nodded and sipped his coffee, not knowing what to say.

“Of course CCD will do the necessary and get your car sorted out, and provide you with a lease hire car while you are with us,” said John Banks, “We would prefer that none of this gets into the press, and we are hoping you will not press charges when we discover the culprit?”

“I am guessing the culprit is a security officer and that he or she will be long gone by now,” said Sam, “Finding out who is behind it might be more difficult.”

“You are probably right,” said Douglas, “But we will investigate it as best we can. The security company investigator is already working on it. I am told she is thorough.”

“I have no intention of pressing charges,” said Sam, “And I really don’t need a vehicle on a daily basis. My insurance should cover the repairs, but I would lose my no-claims bonus, so I would be happier if you pick up the costs of repairs.”

“You can hire a car when you need one, I’ll send an authorisation through to Zenith for you,” said Elaine, “Do you prefer manual or automatic?”

“Automatic please?” said Sam, then realised that he might have a video of the vandal. He didn’t say anything.

“I suppose you know now, that it was me that asked for you to be involved in our Abbey Field Project?” said Douglas, “How do feel about it after this incident?”

Sam nodded, “I am quite surprised, but pleased that you asked me to do the work. I’m annoyed about the vandalism, but it happens. May I ask how you learned about me?”

Douglas Worth laughed, “I told you Sam, it was your sterling work as the Brigade PRE leader and especially your report on that ridiculous servo repair and diagnostic equipment that got me my promotion. I was sad when you resigned and thought that you would return to Zambia. What made you leave, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Sam shrugged, “So many things, but primarily I was frustrated that promotion would lead to a job and lifestyle I did not want. I had been a potential artificer for years, but the job of a REME

artificer is, or was then, a desk-wallah doing leave returns and general administration that a technical clerk could do in their sleep.”

“Well it was the army’s loss,” said Douglas Worth, “I kept an eye on you, it was easier when you opened a LinkedIn account. You have left your mark everywhere you go. I would offer you a permanent job here at CCD, but suspect you aren’t interested in being a salary man again?”

“That is very flattering, thank you, but I have got used to working for myself,” said Sam, “Thank you for the coffee, I need to get to site, so unless there is anything else ...?”

Elaine escorted him to the door and asked him to let her have his car keys so she could make arrangements to have it fixed. Sam promised to bring them to her after lunch.

He walked to the site and spent an hour there, before walking to his lodging and getting his car keys. Ziggy sent a message to his phone thanking him for the PERT printout and saying she was sorry she had missed him when he visited site.

Sam removed the memory card from the dash cam and all his personal items from the Saab, then went up to the seventh floor and gave his car keys to Elaine. She gave him a Zenith card with his name on it and told him she had sent the number he needed to call to his phone.

Sam updated the project data and sent copies to everyone before checking the dash cam footage. He was not surprised when he saw Dominic’s face, twisted with a vicious but gleeful look on his face as he carved away at the bonnet of the Saab. He sighed and saved a copy of the footage on his iCloud account.

He was getting changed when he remembered the two problems that he wanted to double check on Larry’s drawing,

and spent an hour doing that before sending a message to Larry asking him to double check that the service tunnel didn't interfere with the main reinforced support for the entrance foyer. He thought he would leave the problem of the storm water channel for another day.

Larry and Dominic were talking in Reception when he reached it. Larry nodded to him and left, but Dominic smiled sadly at Sam and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Sorry to hear about your car, Sam," he said shaking his head, "The shit that goes down these days is sick man. What did the police say?"

"Not much," replied Sam, "I just wanted a police report for insurance, but they asked for my DashCam, which has a motion sensor activation, so that they can check it out. I don't think they will see much; security said power was out to the basement parking area."

"Yeah, well let's hope they catch the bastard," said Dominic. Sam saw little beads of sweat appear on his upper lip.

Sam nodded and set off. He wondered why Dominic hated him so much, and wasn't sure how to deal with it. It started to rain and he stopped to put the waterproof cover over his knapsack. He was soaked through by the time he reached his lodging. He had run for an hour and a half.

Anne handed him a towel and asked him to strip off in the entrance hall and give her his wet clothes. Maggie called from the kitchen asking if he was OK.

"I heard one of the drivers say your car got vandalised last night," she said, "Where did you park it?"

"It's no big deal, Maggie," he told her, "It has all been taken care of."

Sam had trouble focusing on anything that night, he kept seeing Dominic's face as he gouged the bonnet of the Saab. He slept badly and decided against going out for a run in the morning, it was still raining. He walked to CCD and asked the security officer if the company had located the night officer who had been on duty the night before.

"Sorry Sir, I think Brent has done a runner. Didn't know him well, but he seemed like a good lad for a civvy. From South End he was. Some rough types there," said the security officer.

Sam nodded and headed for Dominic's office. Dominic wasn't there, but Larry was in the office next to Dominic's he nodded to Sam and mumbled "Good morning."

"And to you Larry," said Sam standing in the doorway, "Have you had time to look at that issue with the access tunnel that I sent you?" he asked.

Larry shook his head, "Sorry Sam," he said, "But I can't jump to every Tom, Dick or Harry's tune. Dominic is the Project Manager, if he asks me to check something, I will, but ..." he shrugged, "It's nothing personal, I prefer to work with professionals."

Sam nodded, "Wow!... Well thanks for your honesty Larry, I'll bear it in mind. Thank you for not wasting my time."

"You are welcome Sam," said Larry getting to his feet, "Excuse me, I'm going to get some tea. If you are waiting for Dominic, he has gone straight to site for the site manager's morning briefing. He is a professional."

Sam stepped back and allowed Larry to leave, then went to his office and printed off some data sheets. He sent a message to Dominic asking if he had time to meet at Café Med, then forwarded the email he had sent Larry to Dominic, CC'd to John

Banks and Ziggy before printing a still from the dash cam footage which he folded and put into his pocket and went to Café Med.

He had just finished updating the data sheets from the text responses he received when Dominic and Larry came into Café Med.

“You wanted to talk to me?” said Dominic, standing over and staring down at Sam, “What about?”

Sam looked at Larry, “Actually it is personal,” he said, removing the piece of paper from his pocket, “I would prefer if you sat and that Larry went away.” He handed the folded paper to Dominic, who frowned deeply as he opened it and then folded it carefully.

“Thanks Larry. I’ll see you in the office mate,” he said, “Just give me a minute or two with Sam here.”

Larry hesitated, looking at Sam and then Dominic and back at Sam again, before nodding and moving away. He turned to look back at them from the door. Dominic remained standing till Larry was out of sight then drew a chair out and sat, watching Sam warily.

“So what now? Blackmail?” he asked, “What do you want?”

Sam didn’t answer for a while. He could see the pulse in Dominic’s neck and temple, his heart was racing.

“Why Dominic?” he asked, “Just tell me why?”

Dominic stared at him without answering for a long time, then leant closer and whispered, “I just want you gone man, out of my life, out of my head... just gone.”

Sam nodded, “Well you are a smart guy Dominic, but you are not thinking with your head. You have a great job with a great company and you have just thrown it away. Why is beyond me, but it is obviously eating you up, I suggest you look for professional help. Do it soon.”

“What are you saying?” said Dominic, his face pale.

“Dominic, you need help. Your company hired me as a belt and braces insurance to make sure that this Abbey Field Development stays in budget and on time. For some reason that has pissed you off. You are the project manager, I am here to help you and you decide to trash my car? What is up with you?”

“I don’t need your help,” said Dominic through clenched teeth.

“No, you need psychiatric help,” said Sam, “I really do not know what you have gone through these last few years Dominic, but you definitely need help.”

“You came here to humiliate me and make me look bad,” said Dominic, “You are a sore loser Sam, and no matter what happens, Alison won’t go back to you.”

“Oh for God’s sake Dominic, I haven’t thought about Alison for eight years. I’ve never had much luck with women. Alison wasn’t the first woman to leave me for another guy. I might as well become a monk with the amount of success I have had with women.”

“So what are you saying?” said Dominic, “That everything is OK between us?”

“I never thought it wasn’t until you trashed my car,” said Sam. “Now I think you are out of your mind.”

“I’m a jealous guy,” said Dominic, “I can’t help it.”

“Of course you can help it, you’re a grown man, and a veteran, you need to work on your self respect,” said Sam, “And take a look in the mirror some time.”

“Yes, I’ve let myself go... So what?,” said Dominic, “You don’t know how fucking hard it is to keep everything together.”

“If you are looking for sympathy...” said Sam.

“Yes, I know... look in the dictionary between shit and syphilis. OK, so what have I got to do to make this right?” said Dominic, “There is always a way, right?”

“You need to face up to the shit you caused. Go speak to John Banks and tell him what you did and why, tell him you will pay for the damage and that you will see a shrink, and get your mind back on what you need to do to get this project done.”

“He will fire me,” said Dominic, “I can’t afford to lose this job.”

“I don’t think he will fire you, at least not till the project is over, but if you don’t tell him, I will, and then he will fire you,” said Sam, “Think about it Dominic, you were a smart operator once. Think with your brain this time. I need to go to the site and check some updates. I’ll give you till two PM?”

“You are a bastard, you know that?” said Dominic, getting to his feet, “Fuck... this is going to be hard.”

“You can do it,” said Sam, “It’s either that or flush your job down the toilet.”

“Fuck you,” said Dominic without heat and Sam realised he was going to be alright. He got up and squeezed Dominic’s shoulder, but didn’t say anything. He was halfway out of the café before he realised that he hadn’t paid and went back to pay.

Ziggy was in the site office when he arrived to sign in. She handed him a hard hat with Sam written on it in felt tip. “Happy birthday,” she said, “I heard that someone vandalised your car? What happened?”

“Who knows?” said Sam, “Thanks for the hat. Can we take a look at the storm drain provision on the drawings before we go walkabout? I’d like your advice before I make a fool of myself asking the site engineer.”

It was three PM by the time Sam got back to the office. He was just about done updating the plan when John Banks knocked on his door and came in. He closed the door behind him and asked if he could sit.

“Of course,” said Sam swivelling around and giving John his full attention, “What’s up?”

“Dominic spoke to me,” said John without preamble, “I guess you know what he said, but to be clear, he admitted sending the security guard out on an errand and to damaging your car, he has agreed to pay for the repairs and offered to resign. I sent him up to speak to Douglas. I’m sorry Sam. This doesn’t reflect well on CCD. I thought you should know that Dominic had some trouble in Afghanistan. He took a medical discharge, but it is clear that he still needs help”

“What happens now?” asked Sam.

John shrugged, “Hopefully you and Dominic will carry on, and he will get help,” he said, “There are other project managers in CCD, but they are busy with other work. I hope you will stay onboard regardless of what happens to Dominic.”

“It is a big project, you need a full time dedicated project manager,” said Sam. “I am happy to do the planning but not the management. Dominic seems to work well with Larry too.”

John smiled, “Yes, I saw that email you sent. Larry is loyal to his friends. You handled that well. Thank you. I understand now why Douglas wanted you here.”

Things went more smoothly for the rest of the week, and Larry reworked the storm drains and the access tunnel on the drawings. Sam got membership at the Leisure Centre and started swimming every morning at six.

Ziggy attended the Friday progress meeting and afterwards, waited for Sam to update the PERT and print her a copy on the pen plotter.

“Everybody uses it now,” she told him, “I told Bruce that he ought to get our own copy of the software. He told me it would be cheaper to hire you.”

“It is not that expensive,” said Sam, “And it is useless if not used properly.”

“That is where you come in, is it?” she asked laughing.

“Of course,” said Sam, “I left my lunch at home. Can I buy you something at Café Med?”

“Is this like a date?” asked Ziggy, “How do you know I am not married?”

“It’s an invitation to lunch,” said Sam, “You don’t have a wedding band, though you probably have a six foot seven highlander boyfriend back home.”

Ziggy laughed again, “Perhaps I am queer?” she said.

“Well, even queer people eat,” said Sam, rolling up the PERT for her and snapping a couple of elastic bands around it. He held open the door for her and followed her down the stairs.

“Is this going to be a professional lunch or a personal one?” asked Ziggy as they walked to the café.

“A pleasant one, I hope,” said Sam, “Why?”

“I don’t like mixing business with pleasure,” she said, “Both have boundaries, but they are different.”

“Well, what say you to a pleasant personal lunch?” asked Sam, “You can set the boundaries.”

“OK, it’s a deal. No public displays of affection.”

Sam let his shoulders slump and put on a hangdog expression, “Wot... no snogging at the table?” he asked.

Ziggy laughed and punched his arm.

“Definitely not you wee rascal, and no desperate fumbling under the table either,” she said.

They chose a table by the window. Ziggy asked for a toasted cheese and tomato sandwich and a coffee.

“So...” she said, when the waitress had gone, “I can’t get Maggie or Anne to gossip about you, they say you work, sleep or exercise. What do you do for fun?”

“I like working,” said Sam, “It’s fun.”

“No leisure hobbies?” She asked.

“I read a bit, and write quite a lot. I swim and run, and when I take a holiday it is usually to do long walks. What is your idea of fun?”

“Well now... reading yes, swimming yes, running, not so much. I do love walking, especially in the mountains, a wee bit of sailing, actually I am learning to windsurf, I used to ride, but I haven't done that for years.”

“Windsurfing is fun,” said Sam, “I haven't done that for years. Where are you learning?”

“Well I haven't had any lessons yet, but I can sail a dingy. I have a two week course booked this summer at Loch Ken in Galloway.”

“I didn't know the summer lasted that long in Scotland,” said Sam.

“Och... away with your nonsense,” laughed Ziggy, “The summers are great in Scotland, especially now with global warming.”

“You can windsurf near Colchester, I think there is a club at a Brightingsea,” said Sam, “I was planning to drive there on Sunday...” his face clouded over.

“So sorry about your car, how badly damaged is it?” asked Ziggy.

“It wasn't too bad,” said Sam, “It will be a while before I get it back, but I am still going, if you want to come along with me?”

“A second date already, just wait till Maggie hears!” said Ziggy.

“I take that as a yes?” said Sam, “I had better organise a car.” He fished the Zenith card out of his wallet and dialled the number Elaine had sent him. A voice answered almost immediately asking where and when he would like the vehicle delivered. Sam gave the CCD address and said he wanted it on Sunday at nine AM. He was asked for the number on his card.

A few seconds later the voice thanked him and said the car would be there for him.

They walked back to the site and put up the PERT in the Site office over the old one. The site foreman came in and greeted Sam cheerfully before studying the chart carefully.

Sam had supper with Maggie and Anne and Maggie's oldest daughter, a lovely looking young woman with a sulky temperament. She told Sam that he was renting her room. The Fish pie was delicious.

## **Confessions**

Sam spent Saturday morning adding details to his SketchUp Model of the project and all afternoon writing.

On Sunday, Ziggy was waiting outside CCD when he got there just before nine. The vehicle arrived as Sam approached the building. It was a sleek looking Audi. Ziggy seemed to know more about it than he did. He drove to Brightlingsea, it had changed a great deal in the eight years that he had been away. The marina did not look promising for windsurfing and someone recommended a place called The Curve at St Osyth, a short drive away. They did a bit of paddle boarding there and decided it was not for them.

Ziggy asked if they could go for lunch at a place called Jo-Jo's and used the Audi's built in GPS to get directions. It was crowded but they managed to get a table.

"I think that is your colleague, Dominic Paulson, over there?" said Ziggy pointing.

Sam looked and nodded, Dominic was at a table with Alison and three children. He had his back to Sam and Ziggy, but Sam recognised the back of his head and Alison, who still looked

good. She seemed to be having trouble with one of the children.

“Yes that’s Dominic and his family,” he said.

“You don’t look pleased to see him, would you rather go somewhere else?” asked Ziggy.

Sam smiled and shook his head, “No, this place looks pretty good and I am really hungry. Have you been here before?”

“No, but I read about it on Trip Advisor,” she said, “The garlic mushrooms are highly recommended. And they do craft beers. I am happy to drive if you would like to have a couple of beers.”

“I’m not much of a drinker,” said Sam, “Definitely not a beer drinker. The occasional cider, wine, rum and port. You are welcome to drive if you want to though.”

“Thanks, but I might try a glass of wine.”

They ordered and Sam asked for a coffee and jug of cold water. The garlic mushrooms were great, as was the chicken and pasta dish that Sam ordered. Ziggy had spare ribs which looked great, she only managed to eat half of them and had the rest packed to go.

They split the bill and decided to walk around the Naze. Sam could not believe how much it had been developed since he used to bring the unit triathlon team there. They watched kids flying kites and had an ice cream from a beach vendor.

“Have you spent much time in Scotland?” Ziggy asked him.

“Not as much as I would like,” said Sam, “I did a mountaineering course in the Cairngorms, while I was in the military, and then built half a dozen or so cell sites in Scotland, but I never holidayed there.”

“So what is it with you and Dominic Paulson?” asked Ziggy, she went bright red, “Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked; it’s the wine, that glass was huge.”

“That’s OK. We were buddies in the military, we were partnered on a year long training course and then posted here to Colchester afterwards, where we worked in the same small section for four years. We got on well and then a couple of weeks before I left the military he got engaged to the woman I was going out with. That was her with him at the table, Alison Freeman.”

“Oops! That must have been awkward,” said Ziggy, “Have you forgiven him yet?”

“There is nothing to forgive him for,” said Sam, “And no, I have not forgiven Alison, but only because I haven’t spoken to her since then. They are welcome to each other.”

“She is a good looking woman,” said Ziggy, “I wonder what she sees in him?”

Sam smiled, “Dominic wasn’t always fat, and he was quite the ladies man when he was single. A good dancer too.”

“My ex was a dancer, a professional dancer,” said Ziggy, “Ballet, would you believe? Turned out to be gay too, a bit of a cliché.”

“I’m sorry,” said Sam.

“It’s not your fault,” said Ziggy with a little smile, “Do you dance? I always wanted to learn ballroom.”

“Not well, but I can sort of waltz,” said Sam, “I had six months in a boarding school in Zimbabwe. I did Scottish barn dancing there. It was the only thing I liked about that school. The

headmaster, Mr. Long, was a Scott who also played the bagpipes.”

“My mum is a Long, from Aberdeen, wouldn’t it be fun if they were related?” said Ziggy.

A sudden rain squall had them running to the carpark. They were both soaked to the skin. The rain stopped as suddenly as it started, just as they reached the car. For some reason that got them both laughing hysterically. Sam drove back to Colchester and accepted an invitation to coffee at Ziggy’s lodging on Layer road. She asked him to stop at Sainsbury’s so she could get some milk, It was pouring with rain when they got there.

Ziggy’s bedsit was tiny. She persuaded Sam to let her put his wet clothes in the communal dryer on the ground floor of the converted house and offered him a terry towel bathrobe that was ridiculously small. He ended up wrapping a blanket around himself instead.

Ziggy had got some cinnamon rolls from Sainsbury’s, and put them in the microwave.

“You are very neat and tidy,” said Sam, surveying her room.

“I have to be, there’s not enough room in here to be untidy.”

“Yes, well, it is small,” said Sam. He was sat in the only chair in the room.

Ziggy laughed, “That is an understatement, but it is clean and cheap. I let Ricky keep the house, the pandemic was not a good time to sell and ... well, it’s not as if I can start a family at my age. I want to build my own mobile home.”

“I’ve always wanted to do that,” said Sam, “I made a camper out of a VW van when I was in Germany, and I did a drawing for an old Army buddy who wanted to build a mobile home.”

“Are you an artist as well?” asked Ziggy.

“No, I’m not artistic at all, but I do 3D modelling on a computer using a program called SketchUp. It’s great for drawing houses. Like CAD, but much easier to use. Actually, I think it is better than CAD for most building work.

“I sketch,” said Ziggy, blushing, “Would you like to see my mobile home sketches?”

Sam nodded and had to move so that Ziggy could get to a cupboard behind him. The bedsit was tiny but had lots of storage space.

Ziggy was wearing the terry towel bathrobe she had offered him, and he could not help noticing that her nipples were trying to poke through the material.

The kettle had started boiling, so Ziggy handed him her sketchbook and busied herself making coffee and heating more cinnamon rolls in the microwave.

“Wow, you are an amazing artist!” said Sam when he opened the sketch book. Ziggy looked pleased.

Sam was concentrating on the sketch book and didn’t notice Ziggy looking over his shoulder till she spoke.

“Mostly it is just nonsense, I like experimenting and those are from a photo I took in Stirling, watching my nephew skating in a competition.”

“I can almost see them moving!” said Sam, “What did you use for this?”

“Just coloured pencil,” said Ziggy, “I do like to paint but it is easier to carry coloured pencils when I am working. The mobile home drawings are further back.”

Sam stood and put the sketchbook on a shelf before accepting the coffee and a cinnamon bun from Ziggy and thanking her.

“I like these coffee plunger mugs,” he said, trying to hold the blanket in place with his upper arms, “Where did you find them?”

“My sister got them from a place near Aberdeen that makes them, I can ask her to get you some if you like? I think they are about five pounds each,” said Ziggy, “They are great, aren’t they?”

They sat quietly for a while, eating the cinnamon buns. Sam was feeling very aware of Ziggy, but uncertain of himself. He heard voices from another of the apartments.

“That’s Martin and Tracy,” said Ziggy, “They can get quite loud. Especially when they’ve had a few drinks. I think I’ll put some music on. I don’t suppose you have to put up with this sort of nonsense at Maggie and Anne’s house?”

“It’s really nice there,” said Sam, licking the icing off his fingers, “But this is nice and cosy, and quite convenient for the site.” He picked up the sketchbook and flipped through to the drawings Ziggy had done of mobile homes. They were really good. Ziggy knelt next to the chair so she could see the sketches.

“I got some ideas from a series called Amazing Spaces,” she said, “And I spent a holiday in a mobile home when I was at University. Perhaps I’ve gypsy blood in me, but I always wanted to live in a caravan.”

“I really like this one,” said Sam, pointing at a sketch, “I wonder if you need a special licence for it?”

“No, it’s articulated, but not a heavy good’s vehicle, the only problem is that you can’t get to the cab from the mobile home.”

“Yes, but you can detach the mobile home and use the van to drive around,” said Sam, “Though the hitch is probably quite expensive.”

“Not really,” said Ziggy, “They are called gooseneck or fifth wheel hitches, a gooseneck uses a ball, like a tow ball, but the fifth wheel is more comfortable and stable. You can order them from America.”

“Well, if you want working drawings to build one, I can help you with that. I think it would be fun to build one,” said Sam, “Can you weld?”

Ziggy shook her head, “No, I’d have to get someone to do it for me.”

“Learn to weld, it’s not so hard,” said Sam, “I’m not an expert, but I can show you my set up, it’s not expensive and it is great fun being able to make things yourself. I did a mig welding course at the local polytechnic in Chichester.”

Ziggy looked up at him, “Is that another date?” she asked.

Sam nodded, leant closer and kissed her lips. Ziggy kissed him back, then disengaged, took his coffee mug and the sketchbook away, and sat across his lap so she could kiss him some more. Things got steamy very quickly.

“I’m sorry Sam, I’m not on the pill, do you have any condoms?” gasped Ziggy a while later.

Sam shook his head gently and released her nipple long enough to say, “No, sorry. Fresh out of those.”

Half an hour later they were lying tangled up on Ziggy’s single bed.

“How long has it been for you?” asked Ziggy.

“Four years, I think,” said Sam, “Nearly five. You?”

“Only two years, almost to the day,” replied Ziggy, “A sordid drunken mess and a huge mistake the day after Ricky told me he was moving in with his boyfriend, and the first sex I’d had in five years.”

“Well, we could get some condoms and make up for lost time?” suggested Sam running his fingers along her spine.

“Why are you still single Sam?” asked Ziggy, “I’m not complaining and you don’t have to answer, but finding a man like you, unattached... surprises me.”

“I could say the same about you,” said Sam, “I suspect this is a dream and I am going to wake up and find I’ve made a mess of my sheets.” He caressed her nipples, “You have the most wonderful nipples.”

It was dark before they finally got dressed.

“How about some dinner?” suggested Sam, “Do you like Indian food?”

“Aye, the Maharani is pretty good,” said Ziggy, “I’m starving, though we ate a big lunch.”

“You left your to-go bag in the car,” said Sam.

There was only one other couple in the Maharani; the waiter recognised Ziggy and showed them to a table.

“So,” said Ziggy, once the waiter had taken their order, “What happens next?”

“Well, I suppose we take it one day at a time,” said Sam, “I’m not very good at relationships, as you probably guessed. Let’s see where this leads.”

“Do you want someone else in your life?” asked Ziggy, “I can handle rejection. I am a big girl.”

“I wasn’t looking, if that is what you mean,” said Sam, “I have got used to being alone, but I like you and yes, I’d like to spend more time with you.”

Ziggy leaned closer and lowered her voice, “I would like a proper fuck too, before we get too serious.”

Sam laughed, “Well I’ll try not to disappoint.”

“How serious were you about the woman Alison, that we saw today?” asked Ziggy.

“We weren’t engaged,” said Sam, “I was about to leave the military and was a bit worried about getting a job, but I thought we had a future together.”

“Did you want children?”

“I wasn’t desperate to be a father, but I would have liked to have a child. Alison said she wanted three. She seems to have got her wish.”

“I wanted children, but Ricky didn’t,” said Ziggy looking sad, “Now it’s too late for me.”

“You are still young enough,” said Sam, “There was a seventy year old Italian woman that had a baby. I read it in the papers.”

Ziggy shook her head, “No, it would not be fair on the child, and the risk of things going wrong... I couldn't do that to a child.”

“How old were you when you got married?” asked Sam.

“Twenty,” said Ziggy, “During my second year at university.” She shrugged, “It wasn't all bad, not at the time, but now I realise that he used me. I made him respectable at a time when being gay was not something people liked to admit to. He travelled a lot, I worked, I paid the mortgage.”

“Did you ever suspect that he was gay?” asked Sam.

“I was quite naïve... still am,” said Ziggy, “I'd never been with a man, and Ricky was so beautiful, but he was always tired. He would come home from a tour and fall sick the next day, usually just a cold or something like that, but I suppose when he finally told me, it was not really a surprise.”

She looked up and smiled, “Tell me about your first love?”

Sam shook his head, “That would take too long and probably make me cry,” he said, smiling, “But strangely enough, I saw her, the day before I left Chichester to come to Colchester for this job. She walked into the offices of a company I do some 3D computer modelling for. I hadn't seen her for more than twenty years.”

“Goodness, that must have been a surprise! What did she say?”

“I don't think she saw me, and she probably wouldn't recognise me if she did, not with a beard,” said Sam.

“But you recognised her?” asked Ziggy.

Sam nodded and twisted around to catch the waiter's eye, "I did. Do you want some more naan bread?" he asked.

The week passed swiftly. No one seemed to have noticed that Ziggy and Sam were connected; Maggie continued to tease them, as usual, when they had coffee at the caravan. Dominic was quieter and Larry seemed more relaxed in Sam's presence. He even thanked Sam for his advice during the Friday meeting.

Sam and Ziggy went to the cinema on Wednesday night, ate late at the Maharani and had another hour of heavy petting on Ziggy's narrow bed before Sam walked back to his lodgings. Sam loved the way Ziggy responded to his touch and realised that he was actually happy.

"You look different this morning," said Maggie as she served his breakfast, "Have you cut your hair or something?"

"I trimmed my beard," said Sam, "Do I need a haircut?"

"No, you should let it grow," said Anne, "But you do look different."

Sam invited Ziggy for lunch at Café Med on Saturday. It was crowded and they had to eat outside. They had both helped with an accident on site that morning. A surveyor got his leg broken when a tipper truck broke through a section of concrete roadway that had been undermined by water. The side of the truck had slammed into the surveyor's shoulder and sent him flying into a drainage ditch. Ziggy and Sam saw it happen. Ziggy immediately radioed the site office to call an ambulance while Sam jumped into the ditch, calmed the surveyor down and immobilised his leg after checking for other injuries. The Ambulance arrived in minutes. The lorry driver went with them as well, saying that his ribs hurt.

“I got some condoms, and Maggie and Anne won’t be home till late this evening,” said Sam, quietly, after their food had been brought to the table.

Ziggy smiled, “Don’t eat too much now, I don’t want you falling asleep on me.”

“I feel like a teenager,” said Sam, “It’s quite nice.”

“Aye, it is a wee bit strange, two middle aged lovers sneaking about for a bit of hanky panky,” said Ziggy, “I think I’m going to get a glass of wine to calm my nerves. This place gets quite busy doesn’t it?”

“I’m going to Chichester next Friday after the meeting, back early on Monday,” said Sam, “I’d really like it if you would come with me.”

“I’d love to, but I’ll need to clear it with Steven, I’m supposed to work Saturday mornings,” said Ziggy, “What’s happening in Chichester?”

“I am meeting a good friend, it is his birthday, and he wants to discuss some 3D computer modelling work, it should not take more than an hour, and you can come too, I think you will like him.”

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“Wow, this is a nice room!” said Ziggy as she took in Sam’s Lodging, “I wish I’d known Maggie had a place to rent before I took the mouse hole I’m in on Layer Road.”

“I like it,” said Sam, “Maggie and Anne are great too.”

“Can I use your shower? I’m feeling a wee bit nervous now.”

“Of course,” said Sam, “And we really don’t have to do anything, we could play cards if you like?”

“Perhaps you could come and scrub my back?” suggested Ziggy.

Luckily it was quite a big shower.

“That was definitely worth waiting for,” said Ziggy an hour and three condoms later.

“I’m not sure I could do it again for a week or two,” said Sam.

“Practice makes perfect. I expect to be bandy legged by the time we get back from Chichester,” said Ziggy, snuggling closer, “If I had known sex could be like this...” she shook her head and kissed Sam’s chest.

Sam realised he had been thinking the same thing. He had enjoyed sex with Helen and Alison, and the few brief flings he had had, but sex with Ziggy was something else altogether, she was good looking and her small body was shapely, but sex with Ziggy was like nothing Sam had ever experienced before. He felt himself becoming aroused again, but knew that Ziggy was asleep. He stroked her back and ribs and lay quietly, enjoying the feel of her skin against his. Eventually he got up and cleaned up. He fetched his iPad and sat on the floor with his back against the bed and started writing. He was deep into the story when he felt Ziggy’s lips on his neck.

Ziggy looked down at him, glistening with sweat half an hour later, her cheeks flushed and her brown eyes big and serious.

“I’m going on the pill as soon as I can get a prescription,” she said, “I can’t believe you only bought five condoms.”

“The pill will make your boobs bigger,” said Sam.

“Well they aren’t very big anyway,” said Ziggy, “Sorry for that.”

“They are perfect, all of you is perfect,” said Sam, “So perfect that I just can’t stop myself.” He lifted her up and wriggled down. Ziggy moaned with pleasure.

They had only just finished showering when Maggie and Anne arrived home. Sam went down to help them unload their van. Ziggy followed a few minutes later.

“Bloody hell, it’s about time,” said Maggie, “I hope you can stay for supper Ziggy?”

“Congratulations,” said Anne, “We were hoping you two would click.” She gave them both a hug and a kiss.

The supper turned into a bit of a celebration. Sam and Ziggy helped with the washing up. Sam walked Ziggy back to Layer road late that night. They held hands and it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

“What was that you were writing while I was asleep?” asked Ziggy, “A diary?”

“No, but I do keep a journal, which I write in most days,” said Sam, “It’s a story.”

“Are you an author as well?” asked Ziggy.

Sam laughed, “No, nothing like that, it started a long time ago, when I first came to UK. I always liked reading and movies, but I just can’t be bothered with TV. In those days movies were quite expensive and usually the same film would show for several weeks. Books, even paperbacks were also quite expensive. I read fast, I mean really fast; a standard paperback, say an Alisdair MacLean or Agatha Christie takes me about two hours to read. I couldn’t afford to buy books at that rate, so I decided to write my own stories. Quite often, I steal characters

from a book I have read and enjoyed and just continue the story line. We didn't have computers in those days, I used spiral bound note pads and threw them away when I finished. My hand-writing is so bad I could hardly read them anyway. Now I use an iPad mini."

"So what was the story about, the one you were writing earlier today?"

"It's a really old one, I suppose I have been writing it for twenty years," said Sam, "It is a sort of a follow up on Lord of the Rings; about what happens in one of the lands that Sauron's mercenaries came from, after Sauron is defeated. Swords and magic and all that sort of fantasy stuff."

"Wonderful! I love fantasy tales!" said Ziggy, "Can I read it?"

Sam shook his head, "It's crap, really, I make a lot of mistakes and hardly ever edit it. I make it up as I go along."

"Well, can I try and read it?" asked Ziggy, "I promise not to be rude about it."

"I'll think about it," said Sam, "No promises."

"I'm going to ask Steve if I can work tomorrow morning and have next Saturday off," said Ziggy, "Can I come and see you in the afternoon?"

"I can collect you if you like, we could go to the Pier at Harwich for lunch. I haven't been there for years."

"Am I so skinny that you want to fatten me up?" asked Ziggy.

"You are perfect," said Sam, "Don't get me thinking about your body again, not out here on the street."

“You could always ravish me in the bushes,” said Ziggy pressing against his side, “I wouldn’t complain... God! I sound like a teenager!”

“Tempting,” said Sam, laughing, “But we used up all the condoms already.”

.....

“Do you think he is bugging your phone or something?” asked Ziggy the next day. Dominic Paulson was at The Pier in Harwich with his wife and one child, the youngest. This time he had seen Sam and waved him over.

Sam said hello to Alison and their daughter and introduced Ziggy. Alison smiled nicely and was very polite.

The Pier was quite full, but they were found a table far from the Paulsons, much to Sam’s relief.

“Do you remember that intern Stewart Wright?” asked Ziggy when their order had been taken, “He left shortly after you started at CCD.”

“Yes, he was pretty good and then just didn’t turn up one day.”

“Steven told me that Dominic offered Stewart money to give you false data on the project. Stewart went to Steven, who got him a position with Grayson’s in Aberdeen.”

“Dominic can be an idiot sometimes,” said Sam, “Thanks for warning me though. What does Steven think of it?”

“He said he spoke to Douglas Worth about it, and Douglas told him that Paulson was trying to get rid of you, rather than sabotage the project.”

“Well, let us hope it is all behind us now,” said Sam, “Have they managed to get that tipper truck out of the hole yet?”

“You are a dark horse Samson Botha,” said Ziggy, squinting at him. “You are not telling me everything are you?”

“I am an open book,” said Sam, “That truck is going to slow down work unless they move it soon.”

“Well it is out and the crater has been filled,” said Ziggy, “The driver is still in hospital though, his injuries were more serious than the surveyor’s. Blood clots apparently.”

Sam grimaced, “Poor guy. I hope he is going to be OK.”

Their food arrived, which kept them quiet for a while.

It was raining heavily when they left the Pier, they decided to go back to Sam’s lodging.

They had scones with cream and jam with Maggie and Anne. Sam felt a message arrive on his phone.

“I need to do some SketchUp work,” said Sam, “It will take me about forty five minutes to an hour. I am sorry, it is for an old client and friend.”

“Don’t apologise,” said Ziggy, “Can I read your story while you are working? I promise to be quiet.”

“You are welcome to stay down here and read or watch the Telly,” said Anne.

Ziggy went up with Sam and came down with his iPad mini. When Sam came down an hour later Ziggy was still reading avidly, and Maggie was fast asleep on the couch while Anne was quietly crocheting.

“She hasn’t said a word,” murmured Anne, nodding her head towards Ziggy, “Would you like some tea or coffee? I need to stretch my back a bit.”

Sam followed Anne to the kitchen and did some washing up while Anne made a pot of coffee.

“It’s quite alright for Ziggy to move in with you Sam,” said Anne, “We haven’t said anything to her, but Maggie and I both think that one should grab whatever love and happiness one can with both hands. When I think of all the years I wasted ...” she shook her head, “You are a grown man, Sam, you can decide for yourself. I just wanted to tell you that Maggie and I would be delighted and there will be no extra charge unless you both start eating three meals a day.”

“Thank you Anne,” said Sam, “I’ll ask Ziggy, but she might want a little independence.”

Ziggy looked up when they came in with coffee and more scones.

“Sam it is wonderful, I love it,” she said, “I loved The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings books too. You should publish it.”

Sam shrugged, “I like writing it, but I don’t think I can be bothered to edit it. There are many years of work there and quite a few inconsistencies...” he shook his head, “No, I’ll just stick to writing.”

“Well can I keep on reading this?” asked Ziggy.

“Sure, but it isn’t finished – I’m always writing more,” said Sam.

“That is so great... a never ending story, just what I need,” said Ziggy.

The rain had stopped, so Sam walked Ziggy home. She brought his iPad so that he could transfer the story onto her iPad.

It was raining again when he walked home after midnight, tired but happy.

Sam was busy all Monday making changes to the plan, the accident with the truck, the injured surveyor and truck driver along with the heavy and unexpected rain had altered the critical path significantly. Sam spent most of Tuesday morning with Dominic exploring options to get the project back on the preferred time line. John Banks joined in towards the end of the morning and seemed pleased at the way things were going.

Ziggy came for supper on Wednesday night and stayed the night. She had brought a packet of twenty condoms and informed Sam that she had gone on the Pill. She also asked for the next instalment of the Oliphant Plains.

Steven McCall came to Sam's office with Douglas Worth and thanked Sam for the weekly PERT chart that Ziggy put up in the site office. He asked Sam to demonstrate a few things on his computer and told him that he was definitely going to look into getting MicroPlanner XPERT and getting someone trained on the program.

## **Exposure**

Ziggy read most of the way to Chichester. Sam had to go for a run after the long drive. Ziggy disliked running but went for a walk around the walls and then waited for him at The Café. She was engrossed in Oliphant Plains when he got there.

She loved his house and the basement workshop, and enjoyed welding two strips of metal together. She was less confident with the plasma cutter but managed to cut a series of shapes well enough.

The sex was even better in a double bed.

Sam was surprised that Ziggy could swim faster than him, though he could keep going longer than her.

She offered to help him cleaning the house but didn't insist when he said he was used to doing it himself; she curled up on an armchair and read. Sam drove them to Reg Simms' house in Bosham Hoe. Christine let them in and welcomed them to the house and said Reg would be down in a while.

She left Sam and Ziggy in the spacious sitting room and returned a few minutes later behind an old man in a wheelchair. Reg Simms greeted Ziggy enthusiastically before greeting Sam and telling Ziggy that it was his ninetieth birthday and he was delighted that she could help him celebrate. They followed him to a lift that took them to the top floor of the three floor property.

The lift door opened to a view of rows upon rows of scale models of buildings.

"I have been an architect for almost seventy years now," said Reg, "And thanks to Sam, there are models of every building I ever drew up here. I am obsessed, but that is allowed at my age."

Reg took Ziggy on a tour while Sam helped Christine to assemble the most recent rendition.

"Sam this is wonderful, the detail is so incredible," said Ziggy, her eyes shining when she reached the end. They went down and had coffee and sandwiches with Reg, who then proudly showed Ziggy his 3D printer. He grumbled when Christine told him that it was time for him to get ready for his outing to the family party but thanked Sam and Ziggy for visiting.

Sam drove to Bosham where they had lunch at the Anchor Bleu before heading for Chichester. Ziggy kept checking the time and seemed quite anxious to Sam.

When he asked if she was OK, she nodded and looked even more anxious.

“Well I am alright, but I am also worried that you are going to get angry with me. I hope you won’t, but if you do, please don’t stay angry too long?” she said.

“What are you talking about, and why should I get angry with you?” asked Sam.

There was a well-dressed woman waiting outside his house when they got there. She had an old fashioned leather satchel and was looking at the screen of her cell phone. She looked up and smiled when they approached.

“Hello Ziggy, Mr. Botha,” she said in a Scottish accent, “My name is Katherine Mousewell, I am a book editor for Twilight Press. Ziggy persuaded me to come and see you. May I come in?”

Sam looked at Ziggy who made a face. He laughed and unlocked the door.

“Please do come in Ms. Mousewell, I am about to make some coffee. I can offer you tea if you prefer, or rum or port?”

“Coffee or tea will be fine, but could I trouble you for a glass of water as well please?” asked Katherine.

Of course she wanted to see the story Ziggy had told her about. She produced a consent form from her satchel, signed it and asked Ziggy to witness it. She listened quietly when Sam explained that he had no wish to proof read and edit his writings.

“That is understandable, Mr Botha ... Sam, and if your works are accepted, we will pay people to do that for you. You can choose your level of participation if you like. We like authors that write and allow us to get on with the work of turning their writings into a book,” she said, “Can I ask how much written work you have done?”

“I have never actually counted,” said Sam, “Let me turn on my computer and find out.”

She followed him to his tiny attic office and waited patiently while he removed the dust covers and started his computer.

“Well, there are three long-running stories, only one of which I have stopped adding to... for the moment anyway, and there are...” he tapped the screen with his finger tip as he counted, “Eighteen other stories, some of them quite short. I have others on a hard drive somewhere... It will take me days to find and retrieve them. They are more than five years old.”

Katherine asked which one Ziggy was reading and asked if he would print off the first twenty pages for her to read. While that was happening she asked if he had a particular favourite short story and asked for a synopsis of that before asking if he could print that off for her.

Ziggy had made coffee by the time they were back down stairs. She sat quietly while Katherine told Sam a bit about Twilight Press and finished her coffee, then stood and said she would walk back to her hotel and get started on reading the samples he had printed for her. They walked with her and pointed out The Café to her.

Ziggy waited till Katherine was out of sight before turning to Sam with a nervous look on her face.

“Please don’t be angry Sam?” she asked, “She was at university with my sister, and ... well how can it hurt to have a book publishing expert look at your writing?”

“I’m not angry, not yet anyway, but I have to warn you that I don’t like being pressured into doing things,” said Sam, “And I’m not much of a negotiator Ziggy; one of my many faults.”

“But you will hear her out, please?” said Ziggy, “I did a year of English Literature at Uni, and I think you are an excellent writer. I’m not just saying that because I want you more than anything.”

“Yes, of course I will listen to her. It’s very flattering that you think my story is worth publishing and that she came all the way from London to ...”

“Edinburgh...” interrupted Ziggy, “Katherine came from Edinburgh to see you.”

“Wow, I hope she doesn’t get angry when she reads my rubbish...”

“Don’t say that!” shouted Ziggy, going red in the face, “Don’t put yourself down like that, your writing is not rubbish!”

“Alright, calm down,” said Sam, “I said I was flattered and I am, but I write the stories I write because I enjoy writing them. I don’t want to make a chore out of it.”

Ziggy nodded, “Can we go for a long walk please? I am sorry I shouted, I shouldn’t have.”

Sam looked up at the sky then nodded, “Let’s walk up the Downs,” he said with a grin, “I love saying that; English is so weird. We might get wet but it should be fun.”

It was dark by the time they got back to Chichester. Sam's mobile phone rang while he was looking for parking as someone had taken his reserved slot. Ziggy answered for him.

"It is Katherine," she said to Sam, "Asking if you have time to see her at the Harbour Hotel?"

Sam nodded, "Maybe I can park there for the night? Tell her we are muddy but on our way."

Katherine was waiting for them in the reception.

"I have ordered tea and coffee," she said, "I hope you don't mind?" She looked quite cheerful, "I can tell you now that Twilight Press would really like to publish your work. Is it alright for me to discuss finance now, or would you prefer more privacy?"

Sam looked around, there was nobody within hearing distance, "Now is as good a time as any," he said, "As this was Ziggy's idea, I think she should be part of the discussion."

Katherine smiled, "Excellent. Well, I can confidently say that Twilight press will advance you five thousand pounds for the first sixty thousand word book of the Oliphant Plains, and two thousand pounds for the short story, Spirit Mountain. There is a standard rate for royalties."

"Good Grief!" exclaimed Sam, "Are you teasing me?"

"No, not at all. Based on what I have seen and read I think that your books will sell very well."

The Oliphant Plains runs to eleven books and I am still writing," said Sam.

“Let’s just talk about book one and the short story for now,” said Katherine, “You will need an agent, and I have someone in mind, though she is in Cyprus at the moment.”

“Why would I need an agent?” asked Sam, “Why can’t I deal directly with you?”

“Book sales are good at the moment, the pandemic helped to get people reading, but as life returns to normal, if there is such a thing, we think book sales will tail off. I will of course do what I can to make your books sell, but an agent can do a lot more, and Billie is one of the best that I have dealt with. She will look into merchandising and film rights and all that sort of thing.”

Sam nodded, “Alright, so what do I have to do?”

Katherine opened her satchel and pulled out a folder, “I have drawn up a contract, just fill in the blanks and sign. Then I would like you to send me the first book of Oliphant Plains. It must be at least sixty thousand words and I would say no more than ninety thousand. And also Spirit Mountain.”

Sam filled in his details and signed the contract, as did Katherine and then Ziggy.

“Can I invite you for dinner to celebrate?” asked Katherine, “The food here is quite good.”

Sam looked at his watch, “Have we got time to get showered and changed?”

“Of course, and please email the books to me? I will copy them to Billie and ask her to take you on,” said Katherine, “I think I will take a little walk before dinner. I’ll book a table for seven thirty if that is alright?”

Sam was still feeling numb when he got home. Ziggy had not said a word and seemed ready to burst.

“Seven thousand pounds for something I did for fun?” Sam said when they were in his house, “It doesn’t seem real!”

“Let’s go to bed!” said Ziggy, “I need some serious sex right now!”

Sam laughed, picked her up and carried her up the stairs. They were only just in time for dinner. Sam took his iPad and airdropped the files onto Katherine’s MacBook. Katherine turned out to be quite entertaining and had some wonderful jokes. They finished two bottles of wine and had a couple of Irish Coffees. Katherine got very emotional when she thanked Ziggy for finding her such a wonderful virgin author.

It was well after midnight when Sam and Ziggy fell into bed.

Sam and Ziggy were both feeling very subdued and having brunch at The Café the following morning when Sam’s phone rang.

“Hello? Is that Samuel Botha?” asked a female voice that sounded strangely Canadian and Australian.

“It is Samson, but please call me Sam,” said Sam, getting up and moving towards the door, “Who is this?”

“I’m Billie Greg,” said the voice, “Katherine Mousewell from Twilight Publishing sent me your writing and asked me to be your agent. Where in UK are you?”

“I’m in Chichester right now, but I am working in Colchester for the next year probably.”

“Old Roman towns, I’ve heard of them. Right, well, I’ll be arriving at Gatwick at some ungodly hour tomorrow morning, but I have a couple of things to attend to before I can meet you. I’ll call. Don’t sign anything yet.”

“Sorry, I already did,” said Sam.

“OK, never mind, but don’t sign anything else,” said Billie, “I am going to want to see everything you have ever written, published or otherwise. OK?”

“I’ll put it on a drive for you, if I can find one today.”

“Great. Look forward to seeing you Sam,” said Billie and abruptly hung up.

“Your food is getting cold!” said Ziggy when he returned to the table.

“Well you can take the blame for that,” said Sam as he sat down, “It was the agent Katherine recommended, she sounds really scarily pushy.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you,” said Ziggy with a small smile, “You don’t have any idea of how intimidating you look, do you?”

Sam frowned, “Me?” he asked, “Why would anyone think I am intimidating? Sometimes I think I am too easy going.”

“It’s OK Sam,” said Ziggy, “I wouldn’t change a thing about you.”

Ziggy used her cell phone to find a computer shop that was open on a Sunday. Sam bought a USB back-up drive from Curry’s then drove home and copied the stories from his computer onto it.

It was raining, not very heavily, but it looked and felt like the sort of rain that could last for days, so they decided to drive back to Colchester. It was raining there as well. They had lunch at the Maharani and then spent the afternoon in Sam’s room. Sam got on with some 3D modelling for Reg Simms while Ziggy

read some more of his story. It was the sort of quiet, comfortable post hangover afternoon that reminded Sam of his youth. Ziggy was still engrossed when Sam finished the work for Reg Simms, so he got out his iPad and made himself comfortable sitting on the floor at the foot of the armchair Ziggy was in and started writing.

Ziggy shook his shoulder to tell him that Maggie was asking if they wanted supper. He had fallen asleep.

“Can I tell them about your book deal?” asked Ziggy as they went downstairs to have supper with Maggie and Anne.

“Better not to,” said Sam, “They might put my rent up.”

“Seriously, Sam, don’t you want to boast a bit?” asked Ziggy.

“I’ll answer that if and when there are any book sales,” said Sam.

“I hope that’s just your hangover talking,” replied Ziggy, “Well, I’ve already told my sister.”

“I’ll send her a Thank You Hamper if you help me to choose what goes in it,” said Sam.

“OK, it’s a deal. You can thank me after we have eaten; I am staying the night.”

Maggie and Anne told them that they would be away for most of the week and the coming weekend; Anne’s son was getting married in Wales and they had agreed to go and help out with the preparation and catering. Maggie said she would ask a friend to come and do breakfasts for Sam, but he told her not to bother, he was happy to get breakfast from Café Med. Ziggy asked if she could use their kitchen and promised to replace anything she used and keep it clean.

“I worked in my aunt’s hotel kitchen most weekends and holidays till I left university,” she said, “I’m not a good cook, but I am a great cleaner.”

Monday was a busy one for Sam, the rain had set back the works and he had a lot of changes to make. Dominic had called in sick and John Banks had been called away to a problem with a CCD project in Cambridgeshire. Larry asked Sam to help him with a problem. One of Callaghan’s site engineers had raised doubts about the reinforcing on the pedestrian walkways between the carpark levels and the main mall. Sam looked at the drawings and the specifications and thought they would be adequate.

“I’m not a structural engineer Larry,” he said, “May I send a copy of this to a friend of mine who is and ask his advice? He won’t charge for the advice, but he will want to be paid if you want him to certify the work or provide solutions if there are any problems?”

Larry nodded, “I would be grateful of his advice, and if necessary, I’ll get John to authorise payment if we need more doing.”

Half an hour later they got confirmation from Morgan that the reinforcing on the walkways was adequate. And a quote for certifying the drawings.

“I’ll send this to John,” said Larry, “If Dominic has had the drawings certified by an engineer, he should know.”

It was late afternoon before Sam could get to the site. It was a muddy mess. Ziggy greeted him cheerfully.

“They told me Colchester was the driest town in England,” she said, “It’s as wet as Scotland!”

“They had hosepipe bans every year of the four years that I lived here,” said Sam, “But global warming has changed things around a bit I suppose.”

“Aye, well, at least Callaghan is used to this sort of weather, they will soon be back on track. Steven wants to talk to you, apparently you are it while Paulson is off sick.”

They found the Site Manager with a new surveyor, standing knee deep in muddy water on the western end of the site. Sam offered Ziggy a piggy back as they waded into the water. She declined his offer.

Steven greeted Sam and explained his plan to him. It made sense and Sam said he thought it would work. When Steven said it would incur costs Sam shrugged and told him that it would probably save Callaghan more money than it cost.

“Rain is hardly an unforeseeable contingency in April,” he added, “I don’t see CCD agreeing to cough up money for what is a sensible precaution against flooding that should have been factored into the bill of works.” He smiled, “You can ask, but I doubt John Banks will agree. And all the rubble that you are removing from site can be used to create a raised access road that doubles as a flood barrier and will reduce the amount of soil needed for landscaping the site.”

Steven glared angrily at Sam for a while then shrugged, “I suppose you are right, it will reduce costs in the long run.” He smiled suddenly, “Douglas Worth was right about you, Sam. Thanks for the advice.”

Ziggy stayed with Steven and the surveyor when Sam made his way to the site office to collect the data sheets. Larry was waiting for him when he got back to CCD.

“Christ on a Cross, Sam, have you been mud wrestling?” he asked, as he followed Sam to the ablutions, “John says we

should get the drawings certified. Dominic was supposed to have done it, but I checked with contracts and they have no record of it being done. Can you speak to your friend and ask him to get it done in a hurry?”

“I’ll get on to it as soon as I have had a shower and changed Larry. Can you get a full set of plans ready to be couriered to Worthing?” said Sam.

Sam could hear his phone vibrating while he was in the shower. It had stopped by the time he reached it; an unknown number. He knew his phone would have sent a message asking the caller to send a message. Four messages came in while he was on the phone to Morgan, persuading him to take on the task of certifying the building plans and making it a priority.

It was after five PM before he had a chance to look at his missed calls and messages. The call and the messages were from Billie Greg, she was at Colchester railway station waiting to hear how to find him. He called her and apologised profusely for keeping her waiting, then messaged Ziggy asking her to meet him and Billie at Café Med.

Billie Greg did not look like Sam had imagined from his short conversation with her. She was tall, taller than him, broad shouldered and black.

She grinned and waved at Sam, he was standing under the awning outside Café Med. She had a huge red umbrella and a hiker’s back pack. Sam waved back and held the door open for her.

“Hi Sam, you are very white for an African!” she said and laughed, “I hope they serve alcohol in here, I need a drink after that train ride.”

“Welcome to Colchester, the oldest town in England,” said Sam, “Sorry about the trains, the Liverpool Street to Colchester trip was called the Misery Line when I lived here.”

“Well there is no way I am taking the train back to London, I would rather walk,” said Billie and laughed again.

Billie asked for the biggest glass of dry red wine they had and then headed for a table in the corner. Sam asked for a pot of coffee and followed her. He waited while she fetched out her laptop from her backpack and powered it up, then handed her the drive with his works on. Billie took it, connected it and spent a few minutes concentrating on the screen of her laptop before relaxing and looking up at Sam.

“Katherine was not exaggerating: you must have been writing for years, Sam.”

He nodded, “I suppose I have,” he said, “Have you had a chance to read the stuff I gave to Katherine?”

“Yes, every word,” she said, “I enjoyed it too, which is why I am here. How much has Katherine paid you?”

“Five thousand pounds for the Oliphant Plains book and two thousand for the Spirit Mountain.”

Billie nodded, “That’s more than fair considering you are an unknown. Tell me about the other books, are they all the same genres?”

Sam shrugged, “Yes and no, there are three long sagas; two are swords and demons type of fantasy, one is about a modern day soldier with a vigilante complex...” He stopped talking when Billie held up her hand.

“Do you mind me recording our conversation? I will not use any of what you say without your permission.”

“Go ahead,” said Sam, “The short stories are just things that come to me, I would not know how to classify them.”

“Why do you write?”

“It is how I relax,” said Sam.

“Tell me about yourself, I need to describe you to your readers, what do you want them to know about you?”

“As little as possible?” suggested Sam.

Billie laughed, “So sorry, once you are published, you are public property, the best thing you can do is control the narrative. Let’s start from the beginning. Where were you born?”

Ziggy arrived while Sam was talking about joining the British army. She ordered another glass of wine for Billie and got a cider for herself, and a plate of halloumi and sesame snacks for them to share.

Billie gently interrogated Sam for almost two hours before calling for a break and heading for the loo.

“Isn’t she wonderful?” asked Ziggy, “How old do you think she is?”

“I have no idea,” said Sam getting up and stretching his back, “I need some real food, and I desperately want a drink but dare not. Billie is wringing enough out of me as it is.”

“I’m enjoying it, I learned more about you tonight than in the weeks I have known you,” said Ziggy with a grin.

Billie was quite happy to stay and eat at Café Med. She talked a little about herself. Her dad was an indigenous Australian climate activist and her mum a Canadian First Nation and

indigenous rights activist. They met up at a demonstration in The Hague, and Billie was conceived. She lived with her mother in Canada till she left school and then went looking for her father, who had not known that he had fathered a child. Billie spent four years in Australia before finding her father in Tasmania, where he was in jail for protesting against the building of a dam. She fell in love with a Scottish wildlife photographer who had been jailed with her father and moved to UK with him. Getting his works published got her noticed by Twilight Press, and she became a literary agent.

As soon as they had finished eating, Billie got back to extracting information from Sam. It was almost midnight before she told him that she had enough to work with.

“I’ll spend tomorrow picking through your work, to get a rough idea of what your are about, and then we can start working on a plan of action. How does that sound?” She asked, “I am happy to meet here or anywhere I can get some good wine.”

Sam agreed to meet her at Café Med at five PM. He and Ziggy walked to the Premier Hotel with Billie and then back to his lodgings.

“So what happened to Helen?” asked Ziggy as soon as she had Sam to himself, “How could you just let her go like that?”

Sam shook his head, “Helen didn’t want me, it was that simple. There was no point in wasting any more of my life, or love on someone who didn’t want me.”

“Women can be weird, Sam, she might have been testing you, to make sure you really wanted her,” said Ziggy.

“I doubt very much that she was testing me,” said Sam, “We hadn’t seen each other for three months, it was our twenty first birthday party, which we had spent ages and a small fortune

planning and paying for. Our friends were there... that's not the time, place or way to test how much someone loves you."

"Oh Sam, I'm so sorry, you must have been so hurt," Ziggy looked as if she was going to cry.

"It hurt, but life goes on," said Sam, "Come on, there's been more than enough talk about me tonight."

Ziggy woke up with a start, she shook Sam awake, "What if Helen is looking for you?" she said, "You told me that you saw her recently in Chichester, going into one of your clients' businesses."

Sam groaned, "What are you talking about Helen for? Go back to sleep?"

"I don't want to lose you Sam, I've only just found you!"

"Well don't wake me up in the middle of the night unless it is for sex," grumbled Sam, "I've only just fallen asleep."

Sam woke too late to go swimming in the morning, so he went for a run instead. Ziggy was very subdued.

Sam got two messages from Billie in the morning. The first was a draft of her proposed "About the Author blurb," and the second was a question about his vigilante soldier story. She wanted to know if it was true or based on something that really happened. He wrote back to say he liked the Blurb and that there was no truth whatsoever in the Retribution Man story.

Morgan arrived at CCD while Sam was on site. Larry brought him to site. Sam asked Larry to stay with Morgan and left them talking with Steve and the site engineer.

Ziggy brought him a cup of coffee and apologised for her outburst during the night. Sam waved her apology aside.

“It’s OK, Ziggy, but please don’t go on about Helen? I’ve closed my mind to that part of my life, I don’t like thinking or talking about it.”

Ziggy nodded and didn’t say anything.

Sam had a day full of interruptions but managed to get the project plan updated and sent out before four PM. He was glad to see that Morgan was getting on well with Larry. Douglas Worth’s personal assistant, Elaine, had asked him to attend a meeting on the seventh floor at four PM, where he was introduced to the Board of Directors by Douglas Worth and asked to give a summary of the Abbey Field Project. Sam’s PERT was shown on a projection and he talked the Directors through it and answered their questions. By five PM he had a stinking headache.

Billie Greg was already at a table with a nervous looking young man with a camera when Sam reached Café Med.

“You look as if you had a hard day,” said Billie when Sam approached, “Ziggy asked me to let you know that she can’t join us tonight. Something has come up. She said she tried to call you but your phone is off.”

Sam fished his phone out of his pocket and switched it on.

“It has been one of those days,” he said, rubbing his forehead, “Do you mind if we have a short walk? I want to get some paracetamol and fresh air.”

“Good, I was hoping you were up for a walk,” said Billie closing her laptop and reaching for her shoulder bag, “This is Jason, I asked him to get some photographs of you, just pretend he isn’t here.” She got to her feet and held out a blister strip of pills, “I always carry Panadol, they are strong, one thousand milligram, one should do. Keep them, I have more.” She held out a plastic bottle of water for Sam and suggested that they walk to the castle. Jason was clicking away at the camera.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” said Billie, “But I will keep in touch. I want to speak to a couple of people about your vigilante soldier story, and I want to get an illustrator to come up with some jacket ideas. Katherine wants me to go to Edinburgh to talk about the Oliphant Plains stories, I think she has some artwork lined up and a map maker, so I will probably see her on Friday.”

They walked through castle park. Sam concentrated on breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth and on relaxing his mind. By the time they reached the Castle, his headache had abated sufficiently for him to take an interest in his surroundings.

He told Billie a few things that he knew about Colchester Castle, including the story of Humpty Dumpty and how it came about. He told her about the property developer, who had bankrupted himself excavating the foundations of the Castle, ironically saving the castle that he had bought to demolish for building materials. All the while Jason was taking photos of him. Sam couldn’t help wondering what it was going to cost him.

He was startled when Billie asked him if he employed an accountant or anyone to deal with his taxes.

Sam shook his head, “No, I do all that myself, it isn’t very difficult, as I am a sole trader,” he explained.

“Well, I would like you to speak to someone about your taxes now that you are earning money from your books. Janine is not

cheap, but she is very good. Even if you decide not to engage her, please talk to her and take her advice?

Sam nodded, "I'll certainly listen to her," he said, "Should I call her?"

"I'll email you and copy her, and let you take it from there," said Billie, "I don't mind if you go to prison for not paying your taxes, as long as you keep writing." She laughed, "My husband says he wrote some of his best work in prison,"

They walked in a big loop and stopped at the Tap House for a drink. Sam decided to risk a cider and really enjoyed it. Billie had two pints of craft beer and told Sam that she was supposed to be cutting down on her drinking, but life was just too short. They walked back to Café Med and Billie asked Jason to transfer the image files from his camera onto her laptop. Ten minutes later he was gone.

"Katherine says you are not interested in proof reading and editing of your stories," said Billie after they had ordered food, "Which she loves, by the way, but I want you to be sure and understand that it means that things might get changed around a bit. I would suggest that you insist on having the final say on any changes in your books, which will mean having to read them again."

Sam nodded, "I can do that," he said, "I don't want to get confrontational and feel pretty bad about my grammar and typing mistakes..."

Billy waved a dismissive hand, "Don't let it bother you, I have read some of your stuff and can assure you it is a pleasure compared to some of the work people want me to get published. I'm actually looking forward to reading some more of

your vigilante soldier story. Ben is my kind of guy. Did you base him on anybody in particular?”

“Not really, I suppose he is the type of person I would like to be,” said Sam.

“How do you write?” asked Billie, “Do you have a process?”

Sam laughed and shook his head, “Not one that I have figured out,” he said, “I suppose I just start with an idea or situation and see where it takes me,” he said, “I tried to learn how to write creatively, I watched a few You Tube videos, and read a book called ‘Write Away’ by Susan George, but I just write.

Sometimes I get to a point where I go back and delete a section and start all over again. I do that a lot with the Oliphant Plains, but generally I just write when I want to write and when I am in the right frame of mind, I write for hours.”

“How busy are you with your work here in Colchester?” asked Billie, “Ziggy says you are project managing a large building development.”

“I’m only standing in for the project manager while he is sick,” said Sam, “I am actually only supposed to be doing a parallel project plan, a sort of second opinion on the main project plan and works progress. If things progress as I hope they will, the next three months will be busy, and then it should be fairly easy going for six months before getting very busy again for the last three months.”

“So you don’t anticipate being able to travel for at least a year?” asked Billie, “I’m thinking of book signing tours and things like that.”

“I suppose it depends on how far,” said Sam, “But if I need to travel I can work remotely.”

Billie checked her phone and frowned, “I had better go now Sam,” she said, “I asked Jason to get some photographs of you while you are working, he is a local boy but says he can’t do anything till next week as he has a family thing on for the rest of this week. I’ll go through the stuff he has done and see what I can use for your profile picture and web page.”

She finished her drink and picked up her shoulder bag, then stood and gave Sam a hug, “I think you are going to make a lot of money with your writing Sam. Make a list of the friends you have now. You’ll have more soon, but the list you make now will be your real friends.” She kissed him on the cheek and squeezed his shoulder, “Good night and goodbye for now. Say goodbye to Ziggy for me, will you? She’s a keeper.”

Sam called Ziggy as he walked back to his lodgings, his call went to voice mail, so he left a message, saying he hoped that she was OK and telling her that Billie had asked him to say goodbye from her.

There was a note from Anne under his bedroom door giving him a list of names numbers to call if there were any problems and asking him to feed the fish in the aquarium in their office a pinch of food every second day.

He slept fitfully and was up early the next day. He went for a swim, hoping to see Ziggy at the pool but she wasn’t there. She wasn’t at the site either when he went to check on progress. Mick, the site foreman, told him that Ziggy had been called away to help with a problem on another site, but should be back later in the day. Morgan was on site with Larry and the contractor’s site engineer. Sam spent some time with them before heading back to CCD and updating the project plan.

He got a call in the afternoon to say that his Saab would be returned the following morning.

Ziggy came up to his office that evening just as he was closing everything down. She looked tired and grumpy.

“You look as if you need some cheering up and pampering,” he said, “I missed you.”

Ziggy gave him a tired smile, “Well that is a relief,” she said, “May I stay with you tonight?”

On the way to his lodgings she told him she had been asked to help with an investigation at one of Callaghan Construction’s sites in South London. The QS had falsified some data. It was someone she knew and had worked with, which made her feel really bad, and to add to her misery, her cellphone and purse had been stolen from her room, and she had spent most of the night dealing with that.

Sam ordered a take away from the Maharani, while Ziggy had a shower. They ate at the kitchen table. Ziggy wanted to know everything that Billie had said, and then asked if Sam would let her read the vigilante soldier story. He transferred it to her iPad, twenty minutes later she was fast asleep in the armchair. Sam tucked her into bed and wrote up his journal before going to bed himself.

The next day he bought Ziggy an iPhone 15, and thanked her for getting him published. Ziggy was horrified and delighted, and told him that her insurance was going to replace her stolen phone. Sam went with her to her bedsit to meet the locksmith who replaced the locks that she had lost keys for, which included the communal entrance door.

## **Winning**

Billie called Sam late on Thursday night and asked him if he was sitting comfortably.

“I’m in bed and comfortable enough,” said Sam, sensing the tension in Billie’s voice.

“Have you asked Janine to help you with your taxes yet?” She asked.

“I emailed her,” said Sam cautiously, “Why?”

“Because EpiCentric has just offered four million pounds for the film rights to your Retribution Man story, and they want you to get it published as a book series,” said Billie excitedly.

Sam didn’t respond.

“Are you there Sam?” asked Billie, “Did you hear what I said?”

“I’m here,” said Sam, “Are you serious... I mean, really, four million pounds?” He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and his hands were shaking so much he thought he was going to drop the phone.

“Yes, I’ve just emailed the papers to you to sign,” she said, “And now I am going to get plastered!”

“Wow, I mean thank you Billie... I can’t stop shaking, I might drop the phone,” said Sam.

“Katherine will want to meet you. Can you get to Edinburgh for the weekend?”

“It’s a long drive,” said Sam.

“I’ll book a flight from Stanstead,” said Billie, “Will you be taking Ziggy with you? Isn’t she from Edinburgh?”

“I’ll ask her,” said Sam, “And get back to you.”

Sam had trouble calling Ziggy because his hands were shaking. She sounded sleepy when she answered.

“Will you fly to Edinburgh with me for the weekend?” he asked, “Billie has just sold film rights to the Retribution Man story for four million pounds!”

“Oh that is so great, I’m so enjoying reading it!” she answered excitedly, “Of course I’ll come with you. Oh what fantastic news. I’ll not get back to sleep now, you know that?”

“I can’t stop shaking!” said Sam, “I hope I’m not going to have a bloody heart attack.”

“Breathe into a paper bag – it works, really. Ricardo, my ex, used to do it to calm his nerves before a performance.”

“I think I still have the paper bag the condoms came in,” said Sam fumbling with the drawer of the night stand. He drew out the bag and dropped his phone. After a few minutes of laughter and fumbling around he finally managed to breath into the bag. It did seem to help.

“Thanks, I feel better now. I’m going to message Billie to say she should get tickets for you too. Go back to sleep. Will I see you at the pool tomorrow?”

“Aye you will, and I think I’ll move in with you, now that you are rich!” said Ziggy, “Good night Sam, you deserve it. The story is great.”

Dominic returned to work the next morning, he looked pale, but said he felt good. Sam didn’t see much of him after he had said hello first thing in the morning.

Dominic seemed much more like his old self when they had the Friday progress meeting, which went well. He thanked Sam for standing in for him.

Sam walked back to site with Ziggy and the latest PERT printout after the meeting and then returned to his lodgings to get packed and ready.

## **Losing**

Ziggy asked if she could drive his Saab. He navigated to Stansted and by nine PM they were being shown to their room in the Hilton Edinburgh.

Katherine met them at breakfast and had brought a folder of artwork for the Oliphant Plains and Spirit Mountain. Billie turned up while Sam was looking through the folder, and the talk turned to Retribution Man. Sam let Billie do all the talking, and eventually Katherine approved a payment of eighty thousand pounds advance for the series. When they eventually got back to talking about the Oliphant Plains, Sam told Katherine that he didn't really like the way Tam and Hiron were depicted. Ziggy quietly pushed her sketchbook towards him and asked him to look at the drawings.

Sam preferred the characters Ziggy had done, especially of Hiron and Banron.

Katherine asked if Ziggy was prepared to sell her artwork, Sam's phone rang, and he excused himself saying he had to take the call.

It was, Christine, Reg Simms personal assistant.

"Sam, I'm sorry to trouble you, but it is Reg. He has been admitted to St. Richard's hospital with suspected bleeding on the brain. He asked for you. I said I would try and contact you. Do you think you can get here Sam?" He could tell that Christine was crying while she spoke.

“I have just arrived in Edinburgh,” he said gently, “But I will leave now and get to Chichester as soon as I can. Thank you for calling me Christine. Please tell Reg I am on my way?”

Sam returned to the others. Katherine and Billie were looking through Ziggy’s sketchbook. Ziggy looked up as he approached and asked him what was wrong.

“I am sorry,” he said, “But I have to get to Chichester, an old friend is in hospital and asking for me. I truly am sorry.” He turned and walked to the reception, and asked for help with getting a flight to Southampton, and told the young man that it was urgent.

By the time Ziggy had caught up with him, Sam was trying to arrange a taxi from Southampton. Katherine and Billie joined them at reception just as he ended the call.

“What can we do to help?” asked Katherine.

“I think it is all sorted now,” said Sam, “I am so sorry about wasting all of your time.”

“Nonsense, it has not been a waste of time at all,” said Katherine, “I’m just so sorry about your friend. Are you going to be alright? You have gone really pale.”

“Would you like me to come with you Sam?” asked Ziggy.

“No, it is very kind of you to offer, but you might as well make the most of your time here, see your mum and dad, and pass on my apologies for missing them. I’ll see you back in Colchester,” said Sam, “I’m sorry to abandon you like this,” he held out his phone to Ziggy, “If you could speak to whoever answers and arrange a taxi to collect me from Southampton airport at 13:30 and take me to Chichester Hospital while I run up and pack and get you the car keys...?”

Sam felt the acid build up in his chest while he was in the Hotel's courtesy shuttle to the airport, and spent the last half of the journey with his eyes closed trying to calm himself with breathing exercises. The driver stayed with him till he was checked in and wished him a safe journey. Sam barely had time to purchase a bottle of water before the flight was called.

Sam had two seats to himself and managed to ease the burning in his chest before they were airborne. He found himself thinking about meeting Reg Simms all those many years ago when he first came to UK determined to join the army and learn a trade.

His mother's cousin, Angela Downey, had offered to put him up while he got himself sorted. Sam stayed in the guest bedroom of their large farmhouse in West Ashling, and put up a notice in the local post office asking for paid piece work.

He had only been there two days when he helped a man struggling with a frantic horse that had been startled by a speeding motorist on one of the narrow lanes through the village. The man was Reg Simms, and he stabled his horse at the Downey's stables. The next morning Reg Simms offered Sam a job as an office boy at Partington & Simms. Despite the difference in their ages, they got on really well. When everybody else was telling Sam what to do with his life, Reg asked him what he wanted to do with his life, listening carefully and encouraging Sam. When everybody else told him he was mad to join the Army when he could stay at Partington and Simms, Reg told him to follow his own path and not worry about what other people said.

"You have so many opportunities and adventures waiting for you, Sam," he said, "Do exactly what you want to; don't let anybody but yourself change your mind for you."

Reg was the only person who came to Sam's passing out parade and then invited him to spend Christmas at his home in

Chichester. One of the jobs Sam had done for Partington and Simms had been to build balsa wood scale models of some of their designs. It was something he had enjoyed doing and seemed to have a knack for. He kept in touch with Reg Simms, sending the occasional letter, birthday cards and Christmas cards, and when he learned to use SketchUp, he naturally told Reg about it, suggesting it as an alternative to making balsa wood models for clients. Reg encouraged Sam to do the 3D modelling and it became a useful source of income to Sam, especially when Reg decided to invest in a 3D printer. Sam had never been as friendly with Archie Simms, Reg's son, but Archie provided Sam with even more 3D architectural computer modelling work than his father did. Sam had long since stopped charging Reg for the 3D modelling he did for him, but the paid work he got from Partington & Simms as well as their Hampshire partners, Stubbs & Stubbs, accounted for much of his earnings.

Christine was waiting for him outside St Richard's, she looked pale and tired, but managed to smile as she greeted him.

"Thank you for coming Sam," she said, "He has been asking for you, I think he is holding on for you." She started to cry and didn't resist when Sam wrapped his arms around her. After a while she told him she was alright. She led him up to the private ward and opened the door for Sam.

It took a while for Sam's eyes to adjust. Reg was sat up in bed, his hands clasped across his abdomen and his eyes closed. "Hello Reg," said Sam quietly, he lowered himself into the chair next to the bed, "I'm sorry it took so long to get here, I was in Edinburgh."

"A beautiful city," said Reg, "I spent a year there under James Aitchison, a great modern architect. What were you doing in Edinburgh, I thought you had work in Colchester?"

“I signed a book deal with Twilight press,” said Sam, “They are based in Edinburgh.”

“A book deal? Are you going to be published Sam?” asked Reg.

“I am,” said Sam, “And one of my stories is going to be made into a film series.”

“That’s wonderful Sam. I am delighted for you. I am sorry that I will most probably not be able to read your book. You are a man of so many talents. That young woman you visited with ... Ziggy, she is a Scot, how are things with her?”

“Good, I think,” said Sam, “She is in Edinburgh, probably having lunch with her parents right now.”

“I always hoped you would find a good woman Sam. My first wife, May, you never met her, Archie’s mother, was a good woman. It is important to have someone to share one’s life with,” said Reg. His voice was beginning to slur.

“You need to rest, Reg,” said Sam, “I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“I’m dying Sam, I will have lots of rest very soon. I have a favour to ask of you. My models, the ones you helped me with; I want you to ensure that they go to the owners of the buildings they are of. Will you do that for me Sam?”

“Of course Reg, if that is what you want,” replied Sam.

“It is. Christine has all the papers,” said Reg, “I am very proud of you Sam, I couldn’t be more proud if you were my own son. I want you to know that. It has been a privilege seeing you grow into the fine man that you are.”

“Thank you Reg, you are my oldest and greatest friend,” said Sam.

“I need to sleep now son,” said Reg, “Would you mind holding my hand?”

Sam reached for Reg’s hand and felt it trembling. The tears ran down his face. Reg smiled and closed his eyes.

A while later Sam felt a hand on his shoulder, it was Christine. He hadn’t heard her enter. He didn’t feel Reg go. His hand was still warm when a nurse came in and checked the equipment that Reg was attached to, before disconnecting it. She murmured something to Christine and left.

“We should go now, Sam,” Christine said a while later, “He loved you, you know that don’t you?”

Sam nodded but didn’t trust himself to speak. Christine offered to drive him home, but he said he needed to walk. She gave him an envelope and hugged him, kissing him on both cheeks.

“It is all in there, what he wants you to do,” she said, “I will be in touch with you during the week about the funeral and service.”

Sam decided against going home and walked to the railway station instead. Getting from Chichester to Colchester by train was a chore, and he decided to get it over and done with. He gave up trying to order his thoughts and just let the grief run its course while he travelled, hardly aware of his surroundings for most of the journey. It was late when he arrived in Colchester. He went for a long run then showered and went out to Café Med with his iPad. He wrote till after midnight, another short story. He was up and swimming at six on Sunday morning, then walked home via the site. By lunch time he had updated the project plan and finished the short story. He sent it to Billie Greg, who phoned him minutes later asking if he was OK.

“I’m fine Billie,” he told her, “My friend died shortly after I got to him, he was ninety and had lived a full and good life. I dedicated the story I just sent you to him; Reg Simms.”

“When did you write the book?” asked Billie.

“Yesterday and today, it is just a short story, around thirty thousand words,” said Sam.

“I’ll read it now, while I have the house to myself,” said Billie, “I am sorry about your friend, and glad that you got to him before he died.”

Sam used his Zenith card to get a vehicle and drove to Norwich. He walked around the town and had a lousy pub lunch which he ate less than three mouthfuls of before deciding he didn’t want it. He got himself a magnum ice cream and a coke from a tourist shop and sat on a park bench watching some ducks in a pond while he ate the ice cream. Sam was not used to feeling lost, but decided that it was just the manifestation of grief, and that it was right to grieve the loss of Reg Simms. His phone rang while he was walking back to the car. It was Ziggy, she had arrived at Stansted and was about to drive to Colchester. She wanted to know if she should get a takeaway from Maharani on the way.

Sam told her he would rather eat out, and was about to leave Norwich for Colchester. They agreed to meet at Café Med.

Ziggy was waiting for him. She smiled and hugged him fiercely and asked him how he was feeling.

“Sad,” admitted Sam, “I’ve known Reg since I was seventeen. I am going to miss him.”

Ziggy nodded, “Of course you are, but that is OK. Just take time to remember the good things too.”

Sam nodded, and found himself telling her about Reg. Ziggy cried when he finished with Reg's last moments. It was late, and they were the last two customers in Café Med. They went for a walk around the Castle Park and almost stepped on a young couple making out in the darker shade of a tree.

They were both laughing when they reached Sam's lodgings. Maggie and Anne were back.

Christine called on Tuesday to say the service for Reg was at two PM on Friday followed by burial and then a reception at Archie's house in Goodwood. Reg had asked for Sam to be a pallbearer.

Ziggy said she could not ask for more time off, so Sam drove to Chichester early on Friday morning by himself. He gave the house a good cleaning, then went for a run and a swim.

He sat next to Christine at the Cathedral and was pleased at the huge turnout for Reg. Christine drove him to Archie's home in Goodwood. Sam had never visited it before.

"I probably won't stay long, Christine," said Sam on the way there, "Just long enough to pay my respects and pass on condolences to the few people I know. I've never even spoken to Eve before."

"I would rather not be here at all," said Christine, "Just let me know when you are ready to leave and we can both make a run for it. I can tolerate Archie, and Sandra Partington, but I am not popular with the rest of the family or partners. Reg left me his house, which has infuriated Eve."

Sam smiled, "Reg told me that you were his secret weapon," he said, "His legal Ninja warrior."

“He was a kind man, and a bloody good architect. He believed in loyalty and when I think about how the Stubbs and Mercers tried to take over after he was paralysed... after all he had done to help them...”

“Will you be staying on at Partington and Simms?” asked Sam.

Christine shook her head, “No, they are merging with Connor, Dwight and Mowbray. Talks started late last year when Reg said he would relinquish the reins after his 90<sup>th</sup>. I have been given a good severance package and will probably sell up and go to Portugal. My family have a cottage there.”

Archie’s house was huge. Sam diligently worked his way through the people there, commiserating with those he knew. Archie was surprisingly pleasant, and thanked Sam for being such a good friend to his father. Archie’s wife, Eve, was polite but made no effort to be pleasant.

Sam was looking for Christine when he heard his name being called, it was Helen. He felt his stomach constrict as she walked towards him, with her hands outstretched.

“Sam Botha!” she said, “I hardly recognised you with that beard! What a happy coincidence to meet you here ...”

“Hello Helen,” was all Sam could think of to say.

“I didn’t realise it was you when I saw S. Botha on the books,” she said, looking him up and down, “I thought you would still be an army man. When did you get into project planning and computer modelling?”

“A while back,” said Sam, “While I was in the military.”

“Well you are looking good, I must say,” said Helen, “And no wedding ring... are you gay?”

“Ah, there you are darling!” said Christine, taking Sam’s arm and steering him away, “Sorry, Helen, I need Sam to get me home before the babysitter leaves. You look lovely by the way.”

“God that is an awful woman,” muttered Christine as she led Sam away, “I can’t believe that she asked if you were gay.”

Sam couldn’t help himself, he started laughing and was soon helplessly clutching his sides. Christine looked worried.

“Are you alright, Sam?” she asked.

Sam nodded and straightened up, “Yes... yes, I am thank you. Perhaps not entirely, but I will be. What do you know about Helen?”

“More than I should say, probably,” said Christine, “She is part of the merger, a marketing guru, or so they say.”

“You don’t sound impressed,” said Sam.

“I am not, she is a cold-blooded, insensitive bitch,” said Christine, “And penniless, which doesn’t say much for her marketing skills.” She unlocked her car, “Come on let’s get out of here.”

In the car Christine seemed calmer. She told Sam that she had looked into Helen Carter, and discovered that she had lost everything after investing in and working for a company called Madbird Marketing for six months. The scandal she said, had been reported on the BBC, a man calling himself Ali Ayad had recruited hundreds of people to work for a non-existent marketing company, in what appeared to be a desperate gamble to make something from nothing, which collapsed when a couple of suspicious employees started investigating Ali Ayad.

“Making something from nothing is pretty much what I think of marketing,” said Sam, “Well thank you for rescuing me, I did know Helen in another life, and still bear the scars.”

Christine gave him a strange look, but didn't press him for more.

“I won't be selling Reg's house for a year or two,” she said, “So you don't have to rush with finding homes for his models. I'll send you keys though, as I will probably move to Portugal in June.”

Sam spent the night in his own bed, and set off back to Colchester after breakfast at The Café . He drove to the site and updated the project data sheets and then had a coffee with Ziggy at Maggie and Anne's caravan.

The next two weeks were busy and Sam still felt a sad ache at the loss of Reg. Ziggy spent most nights with him at his lodgings but kept most of her things in her bed sit. Their lovemaking became more sedate and satisfying.

Ziggy often spent the evenings sketching while Sam wrote. Billie had asked her to submit any sketches she did of characters or scenes inspired by Sam's stories and said that she had been paid a goodly sum for some of them.

Sam got a 3D modelling job from Partington & Simms three weeks after Reg's funeral. It was for a community centre in Hayfield, and was too big for Sam to model on his old laptop. He decided to get a new computer and asked an IT man at CCD for advice and help.

Helen called while he was setting up the new computer.

“Hello Sam,” she sounded seductive, “I'm sorry that we never managed to finish our chat at Reginald's send off. Are you up to dinner tonight?”

“Hello Helen,” he replied, wondering how she had got his number, “No can do really, I am out of town on a job in Essex I am afraid.”

“Really Sam? I thought you lived in Chichester?”

“I do, but I go where the work takes me,” said Sam, “I thought you were a Londoner.”

“Chichester is a London Satellite these days,” said Helen, “When do you expect to be back in Chichester?”

“I haven’t a clue really,” said Sam, “This job has another twelve months to go.”

“Perhaps I could come out and spend the weekend with you?” said Helen, “And catch up on your news?”

“I’ll have to check with my boyfriend,” said Sam, “He can get very jealous.”

“Very funny Sam,” said Helen.

“I’ll call you next time I am in Chichester,” said Sam.

“You do that,” said Helen curtly and disconnected.

“Your voice got very guarded,” said Ziggy, looking up from her iPad, “Which boyfriend is that?”

“That would be you,” said Sam with a grin, “That was Helen, the original, the first love of my life. She was at Reg’s funeral.” He told her about the meeting and Christine’s intervention and subsequent conversation.

“I heard about that Madbird Marketing thing, it was on the news!” said Ziggy, “Poor girl, so she lost everything, and now she wants you?”

“Oh I doubt that she wants me,” said Sam, “Her sights are set much higher. I’m probably just a convenient pit stop on the way to the Grand Prix.”

Ziggy laughed, “You are the Grand Prize Sam, and I’m not letting you go in a hurry. Is this Helen, the girl you didn’t want to tell me about, because it might make you cry?”

“The very one,” said Sam, “Helen Carter, she is apparently working on the merger of Partington and Simms with a bigger Architectural firm from Surrey. She is in Marketing.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” said Ziggy, “And a meal at the Maharani, I’m paying.”

“When is your birthday?” asked Ziggy when they were eating.

“Next Wednesday,” said Sam, “I’ll be forty five.”

“So old, and yet so sexy,” said Ziggy with a smile, “I’m going to make it a birthday that you remember.”

“When is your birthday?” asked Sam.

“Hogmanay,” said Ziggy, “I’ll be forty one.”

“Seriously? You are a Scot and your birthday is on Hogmanay?”

“Aye, that’s why my dad insisted I be called Ziggy. He loved David Bowie.”

“Wow!” said Sam, “Your birthday parties must be epic.”

“The next one will be if you are there,” said Ziggy.

The next day, Billie called and asked Sam if he could come to London for the weekend.

“Bring Ziggy,” she said, “EpiCentric is footing the bill, they want to interview you and start working on the advertising of your books and the Retribution Man TV series. Which Hotel do you prefer?”

“The Russell,” said Sam immediately, “I can come, but I have to check with Ziggy, before I speak for her.”

“OK, let me know soonest and I’ll arrange a driver to collect you.”

Sam finished the 3D modelling for Partington & Simms late on Thursday night and emailed it to them.

EpiCentric sent a limousine to collect Sam and Ziggy after the Friday production meeting. Jason, the photographer was outside CCD with his camera, photographing them as they got into the limousine.

“What’s going on?” asked Ziggy as the car pulled away.

“Marketing,” said the driver, “EpiCentric makes good movies and great adverts. You’ll see. Just smile and go with it.”

A young woman with spiky purple hair and half a pound of metal piercings in her face was waiting for them at the Russell Hotel. She looked fierce but was very pleasant.

“Billie Greg asked me to look after you,” she said, “I am Sam Wylie. It is going to be really busy tomorrow but I promise that if you just relax and go with it, you will enjoy it in a crazy sort of way. Can I see the clothes that you plan on wearing tomorrow?”

Sam Wylie was quick and efficient, making a note of their clothes and shoe sizes.

“Alright, that’s it from me for now,” she said, “Billie will be here soon, with a stylist.” She handed them each a card with her phone number on, “I’d like to get started as early as possible tomorrow, what sort of time do you plan to get up?”

Sam looked at Ziggy who shrugged and answered, “I’m easy and Sam likes to get up around five to swim.”

“Can we meet for breakfast at seven?” asked Sam Wylie, “I’ve never eaten breakfast here before.”

Billie arrived with the stylist before Sam Wylie had gone.

“We haven’t got a lot of time,” said Billie, “Sam, sit down and let Levander sort out your hair and beard. Not you Sam, you don’t have room for a beard with all your piercings. Scoot.” She ushered Sam Wylie out of the room and asked Ziggy if it was OK to get some room service, then called room service and asked for coffee, tea and a plate each of beef and chicken sandwiches.

Levander, a slim, softly spoken young man, told Sam that he was just going to tidy up his hair and beard, and deftly got on with it using scissors, a comb and a spray bottle. Sam enjoyed it. He usually cut his own hair and beard with an electric trimmer. He could see Billie and Ziggy in the mirror. They were talking quietly while Billie looked at more of Ziggy’s drawings.

“What do you think?” asked Levander, carefully brushing away any loose hair before removing the towel he had placed over Sam’s shoulders.

“I think you are an expert stylist,” said Sam, “Thank you very much.”

Levander rewarded him with a wide smile and asked Ziggy to take Sam's place. She looked at Sam's hair and nodded uncertainly.

"You don't have to worry, honey, Levander never gets it wrong. Angelina Jolie won't let anyone else touch her hair when she is in London," Billie reassured her, "Sit here Sam, I've just sold the short story you sent me to the BBC, you need to sign some papers."

Sam helped himself to a sandwich and read the contract, then signed it. Billie handed him another contract from Twilight Press for the book.

"That artwork will cost five hundred pounds," she said handing him a glossy A4 printout, "I like it, and so does Ziggy, but she hasn't read the book."

"I like it too," said Sam, signing the contract. "I can see now why you recommended Janine to me."

"She is worth every penny, as am I," said Billie with a laugh, "We have to be at the BBC London studio at ten, the car will be here at nine thirty. Casual dress, something light. I will see you there!"

Billie waited while Levander finished with Ziggy's hair, then followed him out the room while talking on her phone to someone called Simon, telling him to make sure to record Newsnight.

Ziggy looked at Sam, "Well, what do you think?" she asked.

"Rollercoaster," he said, "Your hair looks nice."

"Aye, I bet he costs a fortune though, but what he did in five minutes..." she smiled suddenly, "We have more than five minutes..."

Billie was waiting for them at the studio along with another young woman who could have been Sam Wylie's sister for all the piercings in her face. They were taken to makeup and then taken into a recording studio where a sound engineer clipped microphones to their clothes and tested them.

"This is not a live broadcast, it will be edited, so just relax and be yourselves," said Billie, "I will be here all the time."

A few minutes later John Mills came in and introduced himself. He had a huge mug of tea in his hand and asked if they needed anything. There was a tray with water and three glasses on the table.

"Try not to look at the cameras," John told them, "Just relax and be yourselves, nothing will go on air unless you are happy with it."

When they were ready, John cleared his throat and did his usual greeting, then introduced Sam Botha and Ziggy Blaine. He was very calm and reassuring. He explained that the BBC had just signed a contract with Sam to produce a film from a short story Sam had written. He described Sam as a promising emerging author and said that EpiCentric films had already started producing a series based on novels by Sam, that were being published by Twilight Press.

"From what I was told, your writing talents were uncovered by accident. Is that true Sam?"

Sam nodded and felt himself going red, "Yes I suppose so," said Sam, he turned his head to look at Ziggy, "Ziggy saw me writing one day and asked if she could read some of what I had written. She told her sister about it and her sister contacted Katherine Mousewell at Twilight Press..."

“What exactly did you tell your sister Ziggy?” asked John, “And what was Sam’s reaction when you told him?”

Ziggy laughed, “Well I’ll have to paraphrase if this is going on TV,” she said, “But I had only just met Sam, and ... well, he had swept me off my feet, which was more than enough for me, but then I read a story he had written and I was completely blown away. I told Myra, that’s my sister, and she said she had a friend who was a book editor. Katherine phoned me and agreed to come and see Sam. She flew down from Edinburgh.”

“You must have made quite an impression on her,” said John, “How did Sam react? “

“I didn’t tell him,” she said, “We hadn’t been together for two weeks yet, and he’s very private, I was terrified he would dump me. I thought he would be annoyed when Katherine introduced herself and said she had come to talk to him about his writing, but he just laughed and invited her in for coffee.”

“What did you think when Katherine Mousewell introduced herself Sam?” asked John.

“I was embarrassed,” said Sam, “I thought she would take one look at my writings and say goodbye. I have only ever written for my own entertainment, I never expected anyone else to read it.”

“How did you feel when she offered to publish your book?”

“I was delighted and a little scared,” said Sam, “And I suppose very relieved.”

“Relieved in what way?” asked John.

“Relieved that I wasn’t totally inadequate and pathetic,” said Sam, “It is hard to open one’s self up to the scrutiny of others,

and letting a total stranger read something I had written for myself was actually very difficult.”

“Well that sounds like a good note to end on, thank you both very much for talking to me. I look forward to reading your books and seeing the films. Sam Botha and Ziggy Blaine.”

John stood and shook their hands, “Thank you very much, that went well. Please excuse me, I need to be somewhere else now?”

Billie congratulated them both and asked if they wanted to stay and see the final edit.

“Not unless you insist, Billie,” said Sam, “I feel I need some fresh air, it gets very hot under the lights.”

“You can watch it on Newsnight at ten thirty tonight,” said Billie, the driver will take you back to your Hotel. Little Sam will fetch you tomorrow morning early.”

Ziggy didn't say much till they were back in the Hotel.

“I'm sorry Sam,” she told him, “I never realised how scary it must be for you letting strangers look at your writing.”

“It has worked out alright so far,” said Sam, “I'm sure there will be some nasty critics, but...” he shrugged, “I'll grow a thicker skin. Billie says there will be filters on the web page to delete abusive posts.”

“Do you mind if we watch Newsnight?” she asked, then snatched up her phone, “I had better tell Myra and mum and dad.”

The interview with John Mills was shown mostly as it happened. Sam decided that he didn't like the sound of his voice. Ziggy squirmed with embarrassment and had her phone

pressed to her ear all the way through with her sister Myra on the other end.

Sam switched his phone off and plugged it in to charge. He fell asleep to the sound of Ziggy talking with her sister. He loved the sound of her voice.

Sam Wylie was waiting for them in the dining room when they went down for breakfast. She seemed very pleased with life and told them they had to be at EpiCentric's South Bank office at ten. She said she had brought some clothes for them to try on, and after breakfast she carried several large bags up to their room, refusing all offers of help.

"Some of the film people are snobs," she told them, "They talk designer labels for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Billie doesn't want anybody looking down their noses at you."

Sam was happy to wear the clothes she suggested but refused to part with his footwear.

"Courteney boots are what I wear," said Sam, "You should try some, I'll send you a link to their website."

"They look good," said Sam Wylie, "Why not?"

They had plenty of time and got to the EpiCentric office before Billie. They were shown to an elegant meeting room and offered coffee or tea. Billie arrived and told them that they looked great.

"You are going to meet a lot of people, just be nice and relax," she said, "There is no way to script these things, just don't let anyone get under your skin. Some movie people can be bitchy."

It was exhausting, but not unpleasant. Sam spent quite a lot of time with two of the screen writers, both of whom seemed genuinely interested in what he had to say. None of the actors

were unpleasant to him but Ziggy later told him that she had found some of them to be quite weird. They were introduced to the producers and Sam was surprised when he recognised Adam Ward, the actor and director, who was really nice and down to earth. There were camera and sound men working all the time. There were short speeches and announcements, refreshment breaks and lots of good coffee. Sam Wylie fetched him when it was time to go. Sam was surprised that it was four PM already. Billie came back to the hotel with them.

“That is it for now,” she said, “You did well, enjoy the rest of your stay.”

Ziggy wanted to go out, Sam didn't really want to, but after he had a shower he felt a lot better. They walked to Leicester Square and decided to watch the new Reacher Film. They went to an Italian restaurant after the movie and ended up staying there and polishing off two bottles of wine. Sam got lost trying to walk back to the Russell Hotel and Ziggy used Google maps to get them there.

They had breakfast at ten.

“I don't feel as rough as I ought to,” said Sam when they were waiting for the driver to collect them from the Hotel.

“I feel terrible,” said Ziggy, “But I did enjoy myself. I can't believe we get to keep the clothes that Sam bought for us, these shoes cost a fortune!”

Maggie and Anne made a fuss of them and insisted that they stayed for lunch. They had seen the Newsnight broadcast.

“We are thinking of putting your rent up, now that you are famous,” said Maggie.

Sam didn't switch his phone back on till he got to the office at CCD at seven on Monday morning. He spent half an hour going

through the messages and emails before he reached an email from [Marketing@PartingtonandSimms.org](mailto:Marketing@PartingtonandSimms.org) informing him that organisational reforms meant that they were no longer able to outsource work to third party contractors and asking that he return any proprietary information belonging to Partington and Simms and thanking him for the work he had done for them in the past.

Sam thought about it for a while before replying, cc'd to Archie Simms and Sandra Partington, thanking them for the work he had received from them in the past and wishing them good fortune in the future.

Sam felt peeved for the rest of the day despite telling himself that he no longer needed to do any work for Partington and Simms or anybody else. That evening he decided to get started on the task that Reg Simms had left him and started writing to the clients the buildings had been commissioned by, explaining that Reg Simms would like them to have the models he had made of the buildings. He went on line and ordered a hamper and flowers to be sent to Helen at the Partington and Simms office, with a birthday card saying;

“Happy Birthday  
From Sam”

That night Sam went through the rest of the emails and messages on his phone. He had a bunch of pleasantly abusive emails from the people he was still in touch with from his army days, which made him smile, and one each from Katherine and Janine. Katherine wanted him to visit Edinburgh again with Billie to discuss his Wyrms Guard books. Janine told him that he should consider getting out of the UK for three months of the year so that he could reduce the amount of tax he would have to pay and suggested that he visit her the next time he was in Edinburgh so she could talk to him about some options to make his money work for him.

The next morning Sam went upstairs to see Douglas Worth. Elaine let him in and offered him coffee, asking him to wait while Douglas finished a phone call he was on.

“I saw you on Newsnight,” she said, “You never mentioned that you were an author. Douglas was not surprised at all.”

“I’m still wondering about it myself,” said Sam, “I all seems a bit unreal to me, and it is turning my life upside down.”

“Hopefully in a good way?” asked Elaine.

“Hopefully,” said Sam, “But things usually work out. Actually, I don’t really need to see Douglas, I just wanted to let him know that I might have to work remotely for a while. I have been advised to stay out of UK for three months of the year for tax purposes.”

“Will that be a problem?” asked Elaine.

“It shouldn’t be, I managed remote working well enough during the pandemic, and I am hoping one of the people that worked with me then can come to Colchester and work with me now.”

Elaine handed him a coffee, “Well I’ll tell Douglas if you want me to, but I am sure he would like to talk to you, why not wait and see if he is done before you finish your coffee?”

She asked him what type of books he wrote and said she had always wanted to write children’s books. Douglas joined them for coffee and congratulated Sam on getting a film series made from his books, adding that he had just pre-ordered the Retribution Man books. He said he was perfectly happy for Sam to work remotely and would square it with John Banks if there was a problem.

Sam sent an email to Evelyn Jones asking if she could come to Colchester for a year, offering twenty five thousand pounds and

lodgings and offering to pay her expenses if she wanted to come up for a couple of days trial before accepting the work.

He went to site and updated the project data sheets, then had a coffee with Ziggy and asked her if she was up to another trip to Edinburgh with him, saying he wanted to spend a couple of week days there as well. Ziggy said she would ask Steve and thought he would be amenable.

Evelyn Jones called while he was walking back to the CCD office.

“Are you serious about the job offer Sam?” she asked, “I’m bloody desperate for work.”

“Yes of course I am,” said Sam, “When can you start?”

“I’ll take the train today if you are ready for me,” said Evelyn.

“Let me know when you are arriving and I will meet you at the station,” said Sam, “I’ll reimburse your ticket.”

“Thank you Sam, you are a God-send,” Evelyn disconnected. Sam hoped that she was OK; she had sounded fraught on the phone. He retraced his steps and found Ziggy in the site office.

“Hello, did you forget something?” she asked, “Steve told me I can take next week off.”

“That’s great,” said Sam, “I wanted to ask you about your bedsit, “Would you let me take over the let from you?” he asked.

Ziggy shrugged, “I suppose, I’ll have to check with the agent, but why?”

Sam explained that he wanted to employ an assistant, and needed to find accommodation for her.

“Her?” asked Ziggy, “Do I need to start looking for a new boyfriend?”

Sam laughed, “Only if you want to. She’s arriving tonight, probably late, as she is coming from Cardiff, so you can judge for yourself when you meet her.”

“What’s going on?” asked Ziggy.

“Lots,” said Sam, “I’ll tell you everything tonight, after work. Please find out about the let for me?”

She nodded and stared after him as he waved and trotted off back towards CCD.

Sam collected Ziggy from the site after work, and drove to her Layer road bedsit. They filled the Saab with her stuff and cleaned the room, it didn’t take long. By eight they were having supper at Café Med, after packing Ziggy’s possessions into Sam’s room at Maggie and Anne’s house.

“Where will you go?” asked Ziggy, “A lot can happen in three months you know.”

“I haven’t got a clue,” said Sam, “But I hope I can break it into little bits, say two weeks at a time, I’ll know more after I’ve discussed it with Janine.”

“And you trust this person, Evelyn?” asked Ziggy, “Steve will be worried if you aren’t here, he already asked me if you would stay on after he saw you on Newsnight. He thought you might chuck it in now that you are a famous writer.”

Sam groaned, “Please don’t say that, it makes me feel like a fraud...” he put his hand up when Ziggy was about to protest, “No, I am not putting myself down, I am a writer and yes, some

people think I am a good writer, but famous ... not by a long shot, not yet.”

Ziggy grinned, “OK, fair point, one appearance on Newsnight doesn’t make you famous, but it helps.”

“I probably do not need to work,” said Sam, “But I don’t even know how much tax I am going to pay on what I have received so far, and more keeps coming in. But I can’t just walk away from this job, I have a contract and I intend to complete it. Evelyn is a good project planner. She did two projects with me during the lockdown. They were much smaller than Abbey Fields, but size doesn’t matter when it comes to project planning.”

“Well I am glad you are not giving up on the project, obviously, but I don’t like the idea of not seeing you for three months, we have only just met!” said Ziggy, going red, “I don’t want to lose you Sam.”

“Let’s not worry about it yet,” said Sam, “I am seeing Janine first thing on Monday. We can discuss it after I know what my options are.”

“What about when this project is over,” asked Ziggy, “Will you still be looking for project planning work?”

“I never actually look for work,” said Sam, “I have been lucky, I suppose, with people like Reg Simms recommending me, but it looks like I will not get any more project planning or 3D modelling work from Partington and Simms. I might not even get paid for that last job I did for them. They have informed me that they are no longer allowed to give work to third parties.”

“What?” exclaimed Ziggy indignantly, “They asked you to do the bloody work, you even bought a new computer to do it. They have to pay for it.”

“Well, I won’t be making a fuss,” said Sam, “Everything has its time.”

“How much did you charge?” asked Ziggy.

“Six hundred pounds for twenty hours work,” said Sam with a smile, “Cheap at twice the price.”

“You could take it to the small claims court,” said Ziggy scowling.

“I’d rather take you to Edinburgh,” said Sam, “Much more fun.”

“How did you get the Abbey Fields job?” asked Ziggy,

“Douglas Worth recommended me,” said Sam, “He knew me from my army days.”

They stayed at the café till ten, and then walked to the Castle Arms and played darts. Evelyn called at eleven to say her train had just stopped at Braintree and should get to Colchester at eleven twenty.

They walked to the station, arriving just as the train did. There were only five passengers, Evelyn was the last to disembark, with her bicycle and backpack. She had lost weight since Sam had seen her last.

She greeted Sam with a big smile and lifted him off his feet when she hugged him.

“Put me down you great bully!” protested Sam, wheezing.

“Who is this?” asked Evelyn, bending down to inspect Ziggy, who backed away hurriedly.

“Evelyn, meet Ziggy,” said Sam laughing.

They walked to the Maharani, which was still open and quite busy.

Sam and Ziggy had cider while Evelyn ate an eye watering amount of food and told them that she had been going insane living with her parents, who disapproved of her wrestling, and being a lesbian. She had contracted Covid after the last job she had done for Sam in Swansea, and had struggled for a while. She said she was physically better now, but flat broke and desperate for some work.

“I don’t think she is going to fit in the bed,” Ziggy whispered to Sam when Evelyn went to the loo.

Sam shrugged, “We’ll make a plan,” he said, “Evelyn has a way of getting things done.”

Sam woke the next morning to find the room filled with colourful balloons and a string of beautifully hand drawn and decorated cards strung across the room spelling out “Happy Birthday Sam”. Ziggy, dressed in nothing but a big red bow tied around her middle and a red bow tie around her neck, sang happy birthday to him and presented him with a carrot cake muffin with a lit candle on it.

“Anne made it specially for you, as it is your favourite cake,” said Ziggy, and poured him a mug of coffee, “Blow out the candle and eat up,” she said grinning mischievously at him, “And then I’ll give you your present.”

Sam only got into work at eight. Evelyn was waiting for him in reception though he had told her to sleep late and come to work in the afternoon.

He introduced her to Dominic, Larry and John, then printed off some data sheets and walked to site with her and introduced her to everybody there. Ziggy joined them and introduced

Evelyn to Maggie and Anne while Sam answered a call from Christine.

“Happy Birthday Sam! I’m sorry to trouble you, especially on your birthday, but I’m heading off to South Africa for at least six months and wondered if I could impose on you to keep an eye on the house while I am away?” she asked, “I’ve made arrangements for Paul to look after the grounds and all the bills will be paid by direct debit. Can I give Paul your number to call if there are any problems?”

“Sure, that’s fine,” said Sam, “I’ll try to visit once a month, if that is OK?”

“That will be lovely,” said Christine, “There is a folder in the model room, from Reginald, with some personal things for you. I know he wanted you to have the 3D printer and some other things. It’s all there for when you have the time to visit. I’ll send you my South African contact details when I know them, and I’ve sent an email with a power of attorney just in case... Well, you will be able to read it. I saw you on Newsnight. I’m so very pleased for you and Reginald would have been very proud.”

“Thank you,” said Sam, “Have a good journey.”

Sam wondered if Christine was alright. He shrugged and put the phone in his pocket, then thanked Ziggy for the coffee she handed him.

“I think she will be all right,” said Ziggy, nodding at Evelyn who was talking to a trio of building workers, “Don’t have lunch, we are going out for dinner.

When Sam got home after work there was a card from Billie, wishing him a Happy Birthday, and a card from Katherine also wishing him a happy birthday. Maggie and Anne both gave him a hug and handed him a beautifully knitted jumper and a scarf. He was showered and dressed before Ziggy got back, which

was a total waste of time, because he ended up in the shower with her again.

They walked to the Old Siege House on East street. Ziggy had reserved a table and ordered the food in advance. By the time they left they were in no fit state to walk and got a taxi to take them home. There were two wrapped presents on the bed, and a card from Ziggy.

“Happy Birthday Lover,”

Sam opened the smaller box and found a set of two insulated café press mugs. He was delighted with them. The second present, a large, flat rectangle, had him struggling to speak. Ziggy had done a reproduction of a photograph he kept in a frame of his parents and their dog on their veranda in Zambia. It had been taken shortly before they had both been killed in a car accident, travelling to South Africa. It was beautifully done in coloured pencil.

“I only finished it this afternoon, and haven’t had time to get it framed,” said Ziggy, “I’ll do that tomorrow.”

Sam hugged her and didn’t say anything for a long while.

It did not take long for Evelyn to get to grips with the work, and Sam let her update the project plan, print off the PERT and do the Friday briefing. He checked the project plan carefully and was happy with it. Dominic and Larry seemed to get on well with her too.

“I’m delighted,” said John Banks, “We get two for the price of one, and Callaghan are already ahead of schedule. Do you mind if we poach her when this project is done?”

“I have no objection,” said Sam, “But let her know soon, as Steven McCall will probably make her an offer too.”

## Commitment

Sam and Ziggy were lucky to get seats on the flight to Edinburgh on Friday afternoon. The taxi driver that took them to their hotel told them that Edinburgh becomes a convention hot spot in the summer, with all sorts of gatherings most weekends. The hotel seemed relatively quiet though.

Sam felt ridiculously nervous about meeting the Blaines for lunch on Saturday. They came to the Hilton and were very pleasant. Douglas was a little deaf, Ziggy took after her mother Mary, who still had a girlish figure and a razor sharp mind. She told Sam that her second cousin Alisdair Long, had been the headmaster of Godfrey Huggins boarding school in Marondellas, Rhodesia, and produced a faded photograph from her handbag. Sam recognised the man and the school he had attended for a year when he was eight years old.

Myra, who arrived late on Saturday afternoon, was nothing like Ziggy or her mother. A handsome red head, with piecing blue eyes, she was very outspoken.

“It’s good to finally meet you Sam,” she said looking him up and down as if he were a side of beef she was inspecting before buying, “You are not as pretty as Ricardo, but Ziggy assures me that you are most definitely not gay. What exactly are your intentions regarding my sister?”

“Not very honourable, I am afraid,” said Sam, “We are still in the early stages of lust. She is insatiable.”

Myra stared at him and then burst out laughing.

“You’ll do, and welcome Sam,” she said, “Thank you for the hamper, that was very kind of you.”

“Thank you for persuading Katherine Mousewell to look at my writing,” said Sam.

They were having coffee and cake in the Hilton Brasserie. Myra had flown down from Aberdeen and was going to a hen party that night. They had a tentative arrangement to have Sunday lunch with her if she was not too hungover. Sam liked her immediately, and sensed that she was very protective of her little sister. Katherine had also arranged to meet them, she called Sam's phone and he excused himself to answer the call.

"I'm sorry, Sam," she said, "There's some sort of problem on the road ahead and I have had to take a diversion, I'm going to be late."

"We aren't going anywhere in a hurry," said Sam, "Myra is here and we are in the Brasserie. Thanks for letting us know."

Myra was sat by herself looking at Ziggy's sketchbook when Sam returned to the table. She looked up and said Ziggy had gone the loo.

"While I have you to myself, I want to thank you Sam. I have not seen Ziggy this happy since she was a little girl," she fixed her eyes on his, "Please don't hurt her?"

"We don't know each other Myra," said Sam, "But I hope that will change. I have no intention of hurting Ziggy or of letting her go, ever. Katherine called, she is going to be late."

"How is it that you never got married?" asked Myra.

"I was all set on marrying my childhood sweetheart," said Sam, "But she told me that she could never marry someone like me... it sort of set a precedent for me. Every woman I wanted to marry rejected me, so I gave up." He smiled, "I am not going to ask Ziggy to marry me, I do however intend to ask her to stay not married to me, for the rest of my life, I'm actually feeling quite nervous about it. Do you think she will accept?"

Myra rolled her eyes, “Those are Hugh Grant’s lines from *Four Weddings and a Funeral*,” she said, “She’s already had the white wedding, so she is probably just as wary of marriage as you are.”

“Tell me about her, give me your older sister perspective of her?”

“Big sister, if you don’t mind,” corrected Myra, “She was always kind, and I suppose a bit of a romantic. She worked so bloody hard to support Ricardo and make a proper home... I still don’t know why she let him keep everything. I think she would have made a wonderful mother, though now she says she is glad they never had children. She is stubborn but loyal, and honest to a fault.”

“What are you two looking so serious about?” asked Ziggy as she returned to the table.

“We were discussing your lack of culinary skills,” said Myra, “I told Sam that’s the main reason you are so skinny.”

“I do a very good Indian take-away, I’ll have you know,” said Ziggy with a smile, “I thought Katherine was joining us?”

“She’s late,” said Myra, “Does Sam know about your obsession with mobile homes?”

“I do,” said Sam, “I’m looking forward to helping build one.”

“He can design it too,” said Ziggy, “He does amazing three dimensional computer designs.”

“Would you be happy living in a mobile home, Sam?” asked Myra.

Sam nodded, “Show her the articulated one you drew Ziggy?” he said, “I’d happily live in something like that, but not in a

caravan park. I'd want to find places in different parts of the country where one could buy or lease a bit of land; somewhere with a beautiful view, where I could stay for a couple of weeks or months when it suited me."

"You sound as bad as her," said Myra, "Mum must have some gypsy blood in her."

"Its perfect for a writer," said Ziggy, "We should get started soon Sam."

Sam nodded, "It's a deal," he said, "Here comes Katherine." He got up and walked to the entrance. Katherine came in with one of those trolley bags; a little suitcase with wheels and an extendable handle, it looked heavy.

She apologised for being late and greeted them all with hugs and kisses. A waitress brought more coffee and took orders for cake.

"This is for you, Sam," she said, indicating the trolley bag, "Two sets of author copies of your books, the ones we have printed so far."

Ziggy was very excited and wanted to see them all. Sam suggested that Myra have one set and Ziggy the other. They all admired Ziggy's artwork on the Oliphant Plains and Katherine lent Sam a pen when Ziggy insisted he sign all the books while she went to the hotel kiosk to buy a trolley bag to put Myra's books in.

Katherine and Myra caught up with each other's news while Sam signed the books under Ziggy's watchful supervision. When Myra's bride-to-be friend arrived there was a flurry of excitement as she was a local celebrity, the Scottish professional golfer, Heather Campbell-Wood. She was very pleasant and posed for photographs with several people and asked Sam and Ziggy if she could have a photograph with them

and all of Sam's books, which Myra and Katherine arranged carefully on a table.

"Well that was a spot of luck!" said Katherine after Myra and Heather had gone, "The advertising Gods are smiling on you Sam! Billie will be delighted. I suppose I had better be going too. I'll see you again on Monday afternoon."

Sam and Ziggy took Myra's books and the bags she had left at reception up to their room, then went for a walk up to the Castle.

"So what did you think of Myra?" asked Ziggy when they were looking down at the city.

"I like her," said Sam, "I don't think I would like to get on the wrong side of her, but I think she would be a good friend."

"Aye, she's steadfast," said Ziggy, "She had a mind to castrate Ricardo when we split up. I was worried that she might actually do it too."

"I know this might be a bit of a ... well, the thing is, Ziggy, I don't know how to say this," said Sam, feeling suddenly very awkward, "Please hear me out before you say anything? I know that you were married and that you ended up being hurt. I got burned twice when I was contemplating marriage... So I won't ask you to marry me, but I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you." He took both her hands and knelt down on the cobbles, ignoring the tourists, "Ziggy Blaine, will you accept me as your only lover and partner?"

Ziggy went bright red, "Get up off your knees you great lump! Of course I'll accept you as my only lover and partner, but I want a ring with your name on it, next to mine, marriage or no marriage."

Sam wrapped his arms around her and got up, lifting her high in the air before kissing her.

“Let’s go find some rings?” he suggested.

There were cheers and whistles from people around them as they laughed and walked away hand in hand.

“You’ve got dirt on your trousers,” said Ziggy.

“I really don’t care,” said Sam, “I feel as if I am on the top of the world.”

“There’s a place called Twilight Zone, a jeweller,” said Ziggy, “I’ve never set foot in it, but the name stuck in my mind, and with Twilight press...”

“Lead on MacDuff,” said Sam, “We need to start somewhere.”

They got simple white gold wedding bands and were told they would be ready by noon on Monday. Sam paid and Ziggy asked for them to be delivered to the City Centre Hilton.

“Should we have a gathering of sorts?” asked Sam, “To celebrate?”

“That might be nice,” said Ziggy, “Who will you invite?”

Sam thought about it, “I would have invited Reg Simms, but I have no close family to invite. I do have friends, a couple in Germany and some in and around Chichester, who would be glad to know that I have found a partner, but I suppose we can take them out for dinner when we visit.”

“I’ve a big extended family, but really, it’s only mum, dad and Myra that I would want to celebrate with. We can do that simply enough.”

Ziggy wouldn't let Sam out of the room that night, and ordered room service. They were both fast asleep when Myra called from reception saying she needed to use their bathroom.

She was carrying her shoes and looked very sorry for herself. Ziggy took charge of her and told Sam to go down to breakfast. He took his iPad and caught up with his journal till Ziggy joined him, grinning from ear to ear.

"It's not often that I get to boss Myra around," she said, "I think she had a good time last night."

They went for a long walk leaving Myra asleep in their bed. She called Ziggy just after noon saying she was up and starving.

"Well, hurry up and get yourself cleaned up and dressed," said Ziggy, "We'll pick you up in fifteen minutes; we're going to Mum and Dad's for lunch."

They took a taxi and headed out to the suburbs. Ziggy spent most of the drive on the phone arranging food deliveries and flowers. Myra was busy on the phone with her husband and children in Aberdeen.

The Blaines lived in a small bungalow with a neat little garden in front of it. They had an elderly Scottish terrier and a very fat cat, and seemed bewildered but pleased when Ziggy and Myra arrived with Sam. A few minutes after they arrived, food deliveries arrived, and while Sam and Myra were setting the table, flowers arrived.

"You did it, didn't you?" said Myra to Sam.

Sam nodded, "I did."

"So now what?" asked Myra.

Sam shrugged, "I guess that's up to you and your parents."

“I thought authors were supposed to be articulate?” said Myra.

“No, I think that is Orators, but even so, I am a writer, not an author.”

“Who decides?”

“I did,” said Sam.

“Myra darling, can you help me to do something with all these flowers?” asked her mother, “Sam, I think Ziggy needs some help in the kitchen.”

It took a while to get everything organised. Ziggy asked everyone to sit; it was a tight squeeze. When they were all sat she asked them to join hands and asked her father to say Grace, which he did, surprisingly, in Latin.

After the Amens, Ziggy picked up her glass, “Yesterday Sam asked me to spend the rest of my life with him, to be his only partner and lover. I agreed. We wanted to celebrate with you.”

Douglas and Myra cheered and congratulated them.

“Does that mean you are getting married again?” asked Mary.

“No Mummy, it means that they are going to be not-married for the rest to their lives,” said Myra laughing, “Here’s to lovers.”

“I did the wedding thing already Mummy, it didn’t turn out too well,” said Ziggy, blushing.

“Yes, well I am sure we could get that annulled,” said Mary, “Then you could marry again.”

“Och, I wouldn’t want to waste another second on that fiasco,” said Ziggy, “Sam loves me, that is all I need.” She smiled, “But we will have rings with our names on them tomorrow.”

“Well I approve,” said Douglas, raising his glass, “To young love; may it ever flourish.”

“Well of course I approve,” said Mary, “Even if I don’t really understand why you don’t want a wedding. We can afford a small one I think.”

“Thank you Mummy,” said Ziggy, “But this is all the celebration we want.”

“They are going to build a camper van and travel around like gypsies,” said Myra.

“What will you live on?” asked Mary.

“Sam writes books, Mary, and some of them are being made into films, he will get royalties from that,” said Douglas, “And they can still work on building projects, it will be much easier with a mobile home.”

“I always thought it was Mum who had gypsy genes, but perhaps it is you Dad!” laughed Myra.

The luncheon lasted all afternoon and included a FaceTime session with Myra’s husband and children in Aberdeen. It was late evening by the time they had finished clearing up.

“That was fun,” said Myra in the taxi as they headed back to the hotel, “Thank you both, you made my day. I think mum and dad’s too.”

Ziggy turned to Sam when Myra finally set off in a taxi to the airport, “You are awful quiet Sam, are you OK?” she asked.

“I don’t think I have ever been happier,” said Sam, “It has been a very long time since I was part of a family. I had forgotten how good it can feel.”

Janine was a tall, dark-eyed woman of Asian descent, though her accent was very Scottish. Sam spent three hours with her on Monday morning and came out of her office realising that he knew nothing about money and finance. The only thing they had disagreed on was Ziggy. Janine advised him to draw up an agreement regarding their finances, limiting Ziggy’s entitlement to his money in the event of a separation.

“Even half of what I have now, is much more than I will ever need,” said Sam, “And I am only wealthy now because Ziggy persuaded me to publish my writing. I have no family to inherit anything. I’ll not ask Ziggy to sign anything.”

Billie was at the Hotel when he got there.

“You look like you need a drink,” she said, giving him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“I’ve just come from Janine’s office,” said Sam, “I feel like my brain has been fried by lightning.”

“Yeah, she doesn’t take prisoners, but she is really good,” said Billie, “I lost a lot of money before I went to her, and ... well, I wish I had known about her a long time ago. She is amazing, but her personal skills put some people off.”

“She has some form of autism,” said Sam, “She told me about it and said I should not be offended if she appeared rude. She seemed more direct than rude to me. I expected her to get angry with me for being so stupid, but she was quite patient with me.”

“There is nothing stupid about you Sam, but I know what you mean. She is frighteningly smart,” said Billie, digging a folder

out of her shoulder bag, “I have some preliminary artwork for you to look at for the Wyrms Guard books. Has Ziggy done any sketches for them?”

Sam shook his head, “No, she hasn’t read any of them yet, she is still reading the Oliphant Plains books,” he went through the folder, “These look pretty good,” he said, “They aren’t exactly how I picture the characters and dragons, but they are good. Would it be a problem for you if I met the artist and discussed it with him or her?”

“No, that’s not a problem, except they are in Bangor, Wales, but they are a couple, I don’t know if they are a couple couple but they are partners as artists, Chloe and Christian of Fantasy Art. I like them, as they are fast. The maps are done by someone else, Malcolm... can’t remember his surname. He is also in Wales, Chloe and Christian recommended him. Their contact details are on all of the artwork.”

“The maps look great,” said Sam, “Can I hang on to this for a while?”

“It’s all yours,” said Billie, “Keep me posted on any changes you agree with them? How do you feel, about graphic novels?”

“Do you mean comics?” asked Sam.

Billie laughed, “That’s exactly what I asked when I heard the term. Yes, comics but dressed up and probably a bit more wordy. Comics for grown-ups I suppose you could call them.”

“I liked comics when I was a kid,” said Sam, “That’s how I learned to read. I haven’t looked at a comic for years.”

“Well, I would like to explore producing the Wyrms Guard stories in Graphic Novel format. Katherine says Twilight Press is not interested at this time, but would not object to me trying to get an Asian language version in graphic novel.”

“OK,” said Sam, “I’m still not sure what that entails.”

“It was actually Christian who suggested it, he sent me a Korean graphic novel,” she dug into her bag and pulled out a large paperback and handed it to Sam. There were colour drawings on every page, with a short paragraph of text under each one.

He nodded, “I can see the idea, but I would like to get the images right first. Especially the dragons.”

Billie nodded, “Great. Let me know when you are ready? Katherine can’t make it today, but I’m more than happy with her offer on Wyrms Guard. The BBC is interested in two more of your short stories and have suggested that I speak to ScreenTales about Spirit Mountain, I’ve already sent copies to the Canadian Film Board. What made you write about Native Americans?”

Sam grimaced, “I hope it didn’t offend you?” he said, “I was in a bad place, three of my friends had just died in the same month. All of them from cancer. I don’t have a lot of friends and it hit me hard. I was paralysed with depression and literally lying in a hammock staring into the abyss when the story came to me. That has never happened to me before; usually I start with an idea, some random thought, and I take it from there and see where it goes but Spirit Mountain came to me whole. I wrote non-stop for almost forty eight hours, then slept for twelve hours, woke up and got on with my life.”

Billie got up and held out her hands to Sam. He got to his feet and she wrapped her arms around him and gave him a tight hug. She didn’t say a word, but when she let go, her eyes were moist.

She dug around in her shoulder bag for a while then excused herself and asked him to order more coffee.

Sam went through the artwork again, and didn't hear Ziggy approaching, but knew it was her when someone put their hands over his eyes.

"I surrender!" he said and got a kiss on the cheek.

"Dragons!" said Ziggy, "Is this for another of your books?"

"The Wyrms Guard series," said Sam, "I don't like the dragons, they are too airy fairy, like Chinese dragons, My dragons are muscular, lean, mean, demon killing machines."

"I could do some sketches for you, if you like?" said Ziggy.

"I would like," said Sam, "Did you have a good morning?"

"Aye, I did," said Ziggy, "How did you get on with Janine?"

"She is awesome, I use the term deliberately. I have to go back to her on Wednesday, to pick up a new Credit card, after which I will not have a UK bank account. She has recommended that I get myself a place in Lisbon, and says she will send me some property details to look at, and says we should register a civil partnership here in Scotland, to save us both a lot in taxes." He pulled a folded envelope from his pocket and handed it to her, "I am happy to do that, so it is up to you."

Ziggy opened the envelope and removed the papers inside, read them through and nodded, "I think I can do this today, do you have a pen?"

She borrowed a pen from the counter staff and filled in the forms, then signed and asked Sam to sign and headed off to their room to get their documents from the room safe.

Sam was about to get up and stretch his legs when Billie returned. She looked different.

“I have to go Sam, “I’ve spoken to Katherine. I’m going back to London and then Toronto. Keep in touch and say hi and goodbye to Ziggy for me?” she kissed both his cheeks, picked up her bag and left without a backward glance. Sam hoped he had not upset her.

He got out his iPad to start writing, but could not get into the right frame of mind. He went up to his room and called the number for Fantasy Art, a woman answered, Chloe.

“Hi Chloe, I am Sam Botha, Billie Gregg gave me a folder of artwork you have done for some of my books... Is this a good time to talk?”

“Hello Sam, yes of course, let me call Christian, he’s in the next room.” She had a lovely Welsh accent, though it was quite different from Evelyn’s. He heard her calling for Christian, saying Sam Botha, the author, was on the line and wanting to discuss the book artwork.

Christian sounded out of breath when he spoke on the phone, introducing himself.

Sam explained that he liked their artwork, but he wanted the dragons to look more muscular and aggressive, but with the same look of higher intelligence that they had given them.

“I am sorry, I can’t draw at all,” he told them, “But I have quite strong visual images in my head.”

“We are happy that you can’t draw,” said Chloe, “It gives us a chance to profit from your work. Can you do a video call? That way we can interact and show images.”

“I have an iPad and know how to FaceTime,” said Sam, “Or I can do WhatsApp on my phone?”

“FaceTime is great, we are Mac based,” said Chloe, “Send me your FaceTime contact.”

Sam really enjoyed working with them. It took just over an hour before he was more than happy with the base line images they had created for the dragons and main characters in the book. Christian asked if he had discussed doing graphic novels with Billie, and Sam said he had and was happy to pursue the idea further now that they had perfected the character images for him. Chloe said they would send images to Billie and copy them to Sam.

Sam thanked them and sent an email to Billie, then went downstairs trying to call Ziggy. He needed a long walk.

Ziggy called him back at three PM asking where he was. He sent her a pin and waited for her at the Krem Karamel café and bookstore near the Botanical Gardens. Ziggy looked tired but said she had lodged all the papers and they would be contacted by the Registrar in one to two weeks. She asked if their rings had been delivered.

“I don’t know,” said Sam, “Let’s go and find out?”

Ziggy was delighted to have a ring. Sam had never worn a ring in his life and found it uncomfortable. They had coffee and cake and Ziggy sent photos of her left hand to her sister, parents and friends.

“My friends want to meet you,” she said, “Do you feel up to a night in a pub playing darts and getting to know some of my pals?”

The pub was quite lively, and seemed decidedly gay to Sam. Most of the people Ziggy introduced him to were women she

had met while studying at University. Only two of them were men. They were a fun crowd and all seemed genuinely pleased for Ziggy. They all decided to go for a curry at around ten PM and crowded into a tiny Indian restaurant.

It was well past midnight when Sam and Ziggy got to bed.

By Wednesday Sam was ready to leave Edinburgh. He collected his new credit card from Janine, then went back to the hotel and used it to settle the bill. The flight to Stansted was uneventful and by five PM they were back in Colchester.

Maggie and Anne noticed the rings immediately, and insisted on opening a bottle of wine to celebrate.

Evelyn had done a good job and Sam didn't need to make any corrections to the project plan. He thanked her and walked to site to tell Ziggy he was going to drive to Chichester to arrange for the delivery of some of Reg Simms's building models to their new owners. He warned her that he probably would not return for five or six days.

Ziggy pouted comically and then told him to hurry up and get it over with, saying that she had a lot of work to catch up on anyway.

It was strange going into Reg's house when it was empty. Sam had gone in very early after spending the night in his Chichester home, and was reading the notes that Christine had left for him when he saw red flashing lights outside. A security patrol had come to the house. He opened the front door and was confronted by two security officers who asked Sam to identify himself and explain what he was doing in the house. One was shining a bright torch in Sam's eyes.

Sam told them his name and said he had been asked by Christine Leggat, to check on the house. He was shielding his eyes from the torchlight using the papers Christine had left.

One of the officers asked him why he hadn't called in, as agreed with Ms Leggat when she asked them to monitor the property.

"I was just reading the notes she had left for me when you arrived," Sam explained, "Perhaps the instructions are in the notes, I haven't got there yet."

The officer shining the torch at him lowered it and asked Sam for proof of ID.

They both apologised for startling Sam and asked him to be sure to reset the alarm when he left and to let them know before he entered the house again.

Sam thanked them and then remembered that Christine had told him the alarm code. He found the code panel just inside the front door and cancelled the alarm.

Sam was surprised to find a bank draft made out to him for two hundred thousand pounds, in a sealed envelope addressed to him with a hand written note from Reg Simms.

*"Dear Samson, I hope that you will accept my bequest to you in the spirit in which it was given? Forgive my cowardice, but I do not have the energy to argue with my family and have been putting money aside for this purpose for decades. I would also like you to have the tools and machinery in my workshop as well as my three dimensional printing set up. All the documentation is in the drawer of the computer table. I do hope it gives you as much pleasure as it has given me.  
With fondest regards,  
Reginald Simms"*

Sam carefully folded the letter and returned it to the envelope with the bank draft. It took him twenty minutes to read through everything, by which time the Pickford's truck had arrived.

Sam supervised the boxing and labelling of each and every model. By midday he had a thumping headache.

Giles, the young Pickford's supervisor was intrigued by the models and recognised some of them. He asked Sam what was going to happen to the rest of them.

"I haven't had responses from some of the owners," said Sam, "It might be that their contact or ownership details have changed. I'll have to visit some of them."

"Well, if you are going to visit the buildings, why not take the models with you?" asked Giles, "Save a lot of bother wouldn't it?"

Sam laughed despite his headache, "Thank you Giles, you are completely right. Can your guys wrap the rest of the models? As long as I label them correctly, I can then deliver them whenever I get a chance."

Giles said they could, but they would probably not get finished by five PM and asked if they could return on Saturday, warning Sam that he would have to pay overtime rates.

"That's fine by me," said Sam, "But I'll throw in an extra hundred pounds cash for each of you if you can get it all done, without any breakages, tonight."

The four men and Giles agreed to stay until the job was finished. Sam ordered pizza and soft drinks for them all and they were finished by nine PM. Giles carefully arranged the models by postcode.

Sam spent a while inspecting the tools and machinery in the carport that had been turned into a workshop, remembering the hours he had spent there, helping Reg with his many projects. He reset the alarm and drove back to Chichester.

On Saturday morning he spent an hour rearranging things in his basement workshop and decided that he needed to get rid of a few things. Reg's woodworking machinery was far better than the mostly DIY things that Sam had been using. He used his phone to take photographs of the items he wanted to dispose of and sent them to the St. Wilfred's Hospice, asking if they would like the items, saying he could deliver. Half an hour later he was struggling get the table saw up the stairs and into the Budget Rental van he had hired and wishing he had asked them to collect. By noon he had returned the rental van and his workshop looked empty. He had lunch at The Café, and spent the afternoon there using the internet to track down the owners of buildings that he still had models of. He went to the post office and sent the bank draft to Janine with a copy of the letter from Reg Simms by registered mail.

He called Ziggy that night; she was with Maggie and Anne, watching Evelyn in a wrestling match on TV. Ziggy said it looked brutal and she wasn't enjoying it.

Sam went for a long walk on Sunday morning, and spent most of the day writing. He and Ziggy had a long video chat in the evening and she told him that her sister and her husband were enjoying his books.

On Monday Sam called Giles at Pickford's and asked him to move some woodworking machinery from Bosham to Chichester. He was still rearranging his workshop that afternoon when Billie called him and said she had sold the film rights to Spirit Mountain for five million dollars to ScreenTales and that she was waiting to be called to board a flight to Seoul, where she was going to sign a book deal to make a Korean language series of graphic novels from the Wyrms Guard stories. She said the deal was worth just over eighty thousand dollars, and there would be much more to be made from royalties and merchandising.

Sam spent all of Tuesday and Wednesday delivering models to properties in Sussex, Hampshire and Dorset. He still had twenty seven models of buildings in UK, two in Belgium and three in Portugal. He stayed up late trawling the Internet for contact details of the UK properties. He discovered that two of the buildings no longer existed, having been demolished and replaced by larger buildings. By Friday there were only eight models that he had not found the owners for. Giles happily collected the two models of the houses that had been demolished.

Sam decided to send the Belgium and Portuguese models by DHL. Giles agreed to get it done as long as Sam paid DHL. Sam then rented a small Budget van and delivered two models in Surrey and one in Shropshire. The owners of the houses were delighted. The lady in Shropshire recognised Sam as the author she had seen on Newsnight. She had been born and raised in Zambia.

Sam drove to Colchester on Sunday and on Monday morning took delivery from Pickford's of Reg's 3D printer at the CCD offices. It took him all day to get it set up with the help of IT Dave. Everybody in CCD wanted to see it. Sam managed, with lots of help from IT Dave, to print a plastic boat from the set up section of the software. Fifteen people crowded into his office to watch it being printed.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Evelyn, she had a black eye and stitches on her cheek.

"I'm going to print a model of the Abbey Field project," Sam told her, "You are managing the planning well enough, so..." He shrugged, "It will keep me out of your hair."

"Thanks Boss," said Evelyn grinning widely.

## Moving on

Sam spent the rest of the week at his lodgings working on the 3D SketchUp model of the Abbey Field Project, dividing it into sections that could be 3D printed and assembled.

Billie called twice, once from Hong Kong and once from Tokyo. The Wyrms Guard graphic novels were going to be printed in Japanese, Cantonese and Mandarin, as well as Korean. She told them they were also interested in the Oliphant Plains and Retribution Man.

“David Moy says your style of writing is particularly well suited to graphic novels,” said Billie, “He thinks the spin offs from branding and marketing will earn you millions of dollars, and that is just from Wyrms Guard. He is already working on a VR Game version, which he wants to have ready for the launch of the first book. Can you get to Seoul in July?”

“I have no idea,” said Sam, “Do I need a Visa and vaccinations?”

Billie laughed so much she started coughing, “Sam you do make me laugh sometimes,” she spluttered, “No, you just need to say you can come and I will make it happen, in luxury baby.”

“I can go,” said Sam, “I’d like to bring Ziggy, but I don’t know if she can get time off.”

“Don’t be silly Sam, neither you nor Ziggy need to work again, not with the money you are earning. I’ll make the arrangements, leave it to me.”

Sam had mixed feelings about how best to approach the subject with Ziggy. He suggested a walk around Castle Park and supper at the Maharani when she got back from site.

“You are leaving, aren’t you,” she said as soon as they left the house, “Is it just UK, or me as well?”

Sam stared at her, “What are you talking about?” he asked.

“It’s OK Sam, I understand that things have changed for you, you have been distracted all week. I’m a big girl, just be honest with me.”

“You are definitely not big,” said Sam, “Well, not in size anyway. I have and always will be honest with you, and I am definitely not leaving you.”

“Well that’s a relief, so what’s making you so anal tonight?” asked Ziggy.

“You are,” said Sam, “I do not want to offend you and have been trying to work out how to ask you a question that might just do that.”

“Och, you great ninny, just spit it out!” said Ziggy with a laugh, “I’ll not bite you or anything like that!”

“Would you mind if I found someone to replace you?” asked Sam.

“What?” asked Ziggy, “Why do you want to replace me?”

“OK, that came out wrong – I mean to replace you on site, at Abbey Field, so that you can travel with me? I need to spend three months a year out of UK, and I don’t want to do that without you,” said Sam.

“I’ve already found someone to take over from me, Anthony Holiday. He’s starting next week.”

“Oh,” Sam blinked, and felt suddenly deflated, “Well, I suppose that is that then.”

“Don’t worry, I am not going to leech off you; Billie sold some of my artwork. I am going to try and do more art and sell it.”

“You were winding me up, weren’t you?” said Sam.

Zingy laughed, “I suppose I was...” she laughed, “I’m sorry, it’s just that you are... I don’t know... but I like it about you.”

“Oh, well of course, it’s all clear as mud now,” said Sam.

“Well that’s good,” said Ziggy, “Where are we going?”

“Portugal,” said Sam, “To buy an apartment, Janine says there is a two bedroom room studio apartment overlooking a park that is going for half the price it is worth. In Lisbon.”

“When?” asked Ziggy.

“There’s no rush,” said Sam, “Janine has already paid the deposit, and says we have sixty days to pay the balance. If we don’t like it she is sure she can sell it at a profit.”

“How did she get it cheaply?” asked Ziggy, “What is wrong with it?”

Sam laughed, “It belongs to the daughter of a former dictator, who has been exposed by a football fan of all people. She is trying to sell all her assets before they get confiscated.”

“Aren’t you worried that you might lose it?”

“No, not really,” said Sam, “If we do everything properly it should be a safe purchase. Janine knows what she is doing. Billie wants me in Seoul for the first week of July, and I would like to see the apartment in Lisbon before that.”

“I’ll get hold of Anthony tomorrow and see if he can come sooner,” said Ziggy, “Steven says he can manage for a week or so without me, but I would hate for there to be any problems because of me going.”

The Maharani was busy when they got there. Sam and Ziggy almost had to shout to hear each other.

“Do you ever get angry?” asked Ziggy, while they waited for their food.

“Not if I can help it, why?” replied Sam.

“I just wondered,” said Ziggy, “You always seem so controlled.”

“I don’t like getting angry,” said Sam, “It takes me a very long time to calm down, and I usually just hurt myself if I lose my temper.”

“Have you ever watched Evelyn wrestling?” asked Ziggy.

“No, it’s not my idea of entertainment,” said Sam, “I heard that a building site labourer told her once that it was all pre-rehearsed play acting, which sounds wrong. Apparently she challenged him to a bout after work and made him look a real idiot.”

“I supposed all rehearsing is done in advance of the main event, so yes, pre-rehearsed seems wrong. I’ve never heard of post rehearsals.”

“Aren’t they called piss-ups?” said Sam.

It took all of Sunday, from early morning till almost midnight to print off the last of the modules making up the Abbey Field project. Ziggy and Evelyn helped to clean up the pieces. There were a few mistakes, but it looked impressive. They assembled the model in CCD reception and went to Café Med to celebrate.

By ten on Monday morning Sam had corrected and reprinted the faulty modules. He was installing them when Douglas Worth approached.

“This is quite impressive Sam, I’m hoping you are willing to sell it to us?” he said.

Sam smiled, “Consider it a gift Douglas, a token of my gratitude.”

“I haven’t done you any favours Sam, it is the other way round. Honestly, it must have cost quite a lot to do.”

“Well, it hasn’t cost me anything but time, but you can buy more filler reels for the printer if you like. I used up most of what I had on this, it is a big project,” said Sam.

“Larry is going to want a 3D printer now,” said Douglas.

“Well, I’m not selling mine, but you can probably find a bigger one that costs less than this one did. That’s the way the technology is going. IT Dave knows a fair bit about them, you should speak to him,” said Sam.

“Ms. Jones is doing well,” said Douglas, “I watched her wrestle last week, she’s tough!”

“She told me that CCD has offered to take her on when the project is over,” said Sam, “She is a good project manager, but you will need to invest in MicroPlanner XPERT if you want make the most of her project planning skills. Microsoft Project just doesn’t cut the mustard, in my opinion. MicroPlanner costs a bit, but it is well worth it if you have a planner that is prepared to do the detail to make the most of its capabilities.”

“Well, you can tell her from me, and I’ll follow it up in writing,” said Douglas, “That CCD will pay for a software licence in her name if she gets the Abbey Field project completed on time and in budget.”

Sam nodded, “Will do.”

By Wednesday Ziggy had handed over to the new QS, and Evelyn seemed to work well with him. On Thursday they flew to Lisbon. The estate agent sent a car to collect them from the airport.

Sam liked the apartment before he reached it. The Copenhagen Coffee lab and Bakery was directly below the apartment and smelled perfect. The apartment itself was bare! Even the electrical outlets had been removed, which enraged the Estate Agent, who spent fifteen minutes berating someone on the phone in fluent sounding Portuguese, though she looked and sounded very Indian when she spoke English. She apologised to Sam and Ziggy profusely. The apartment had been sold fully furnished. Sam suggested that she change the locks pronto.

After another fifteen minutes on the phone, they were offered rooms in a nearby Hotel while the locks were changed and the electrical outlets, switches and light fittings were replaced. The estate agent directed them to the hotel, which was just two blocks away. Sam and Ziggy left their cases in the hotel then walked back to the apartment to make a list of what they needed to purchase before they could move in. The estate agent was there with two police officers.

It did not take long to make a pencil sketch of the floor plan. The estate agent wrote down the names of three furniture stores that she thought were suitable and they used a taxi to take them to the first one. Sam's childhood Portuguese was not much use, but the sales person spoke excellent English. Ziggy persuaded Sam not to be too extravagant, saying they should get just the basics at first. By four PM they had both had enough of shopping and took a taxi back to the apartment. The locks had been changed and they couldn't get in, so they had a late lunch in the Copenhagen Coffee Lab while they waited for Ayala to bring them keys.

The deliveries promised for nine AM on Friday eventually started arriving at eleven. By three PM the apartment was filled with packing material and they had to call Ayala to arrange for it to be collected. Helle, the owner of the Copenhagen Coffee Lab advised them to have an alarm installed and recommended the company that she used. Sam and Ziggy moved into the apartment on Sunday and discovered that they had a parking bay allocated to the flat. Sam told Helle that she was welcome to use it. He had no intention of getting a car or driving in Lisbon.

They had a week to get used to the apartment and explore their surroundings before flying to Seoul. Neither Sam nor Ziggy had flown in such luxury before, it was quite an experience. They were met at Seoul Airport by David Moy the chairman of Moy Publications and chauffeur driven to a luxurious apartment with a koi pond the size of a small swimming pool in the living room. David thanked them for coming and told them to relax and get some rest. He said Billie would arrange for them to go out for dinner and explain the itinerary to them. The apartment came with a delightful Philippine couple who didn't speak much English, but who made them feel very welcome and made excellent coffee.

Billie arrived an hour or so after they arrived, she handed them phones and told them everything had been programmed into the phones for them, including a video in English welcoming them to Seoul and Moy Publications, giving a brief overview of the company before explaining what was going to happen and when.

That evening there was a press conference in a luxury hotel. Sam and Ziggy were each paired with translators who sat with them, translating everything. Billie was nowhere to be seen. David Moy did most of the talking. A few, very polite questions were asked of Sam and Ziggy. Somehow they both managed to smile through it all. After the press conference, food was brought out and waiters circulated with trays of champagne.

Billie joined them and told them she wasn't feeling great after drinking far too much the night before. She told them that several top film executives and stars were at the reception, and told them to keep their translators close, then excused herself. David Moy introduced them to a bewildering number of individuals, most of whom spoke excellent English. Ziggy got a lot of attention from a trio of young people, who turned out to be the artists in charge of the graphic side of the novels.

They got back to their apartment in the early hours of the morning, and slept till eleven. They were enjoying a delicious brunch when Billie arrived. She seemed more like her usual self and told them that David Moy was delighted and hoped they could stay for two more days.

They ended up staying in Seoul for ten days. Sam and Ziggy got to try out the prototype of the Wyrms Guard virtual reality game. The Koreans were calling Wyrms Guard the Dragon Sword Tales. Sam had never experienced anything like it before. The dragons were truly terrifying. Ziggy was kept busy working with the artists and had so impressed the VR team that they used a clip of Ziggy battling a demon in their promotional video. They were both interviewed live on a popular Korean TV show.

On their last day in Seoul, David Moy took them to a factory producing figures from the series. Sam impressed the staff with his knowledge of 3D printing, though he said he had never imagined equipment as sophisticated as they were using. Sam and especially Ziggy were much in demand for selfies with the staff.

They flew back to Lisbon with Billie, who took two days to persuade them to travel with her to New York.

After a long day of book signing in New York, Sam was getting grumpy. Ziggy took him out to dinner in a small Italian restaurant and told him that he was now richer than anyone

deserved to be, because ordinary people bought his books and the “geegaws” as she called them that went with the comics and video games and that he needed to remember that. Sam apologised to Billie the next day and agreed to a two week book signing tour.

They returned to UK and visited Myra and her family in Aberdeen. Ziggy had sent a suitcase filled with the merchandising items they had been given in Seoul to Myra for her nephew and nieces. Myra’s husband Andy collected them from the airport and told them that the fighting over who owned what had almost ended. Jennifer, the blonde, blue-eyed twin of Caithlin, had claimed all the Jeni Fierce figures including the Bronze dragon for herself and was still disputing ownership of Mara and Vale, because they were Jeni’s children. Bruce, the oldest, was more interested in the graphic novels, although they were in Korean. Myra said she was reading the novels to them, while Bruce followed the progress of the story in the comic books, as she called the graphic novels. She told Sam to get English language versions printed, saying they would help to get kids reading.

“The stories are rated sixteen plus,” said Sam, making Myra laugh.

“There is no way to stop kids accessing on-line stuff these days,” she said, “Bruce says some of his friends have the kindle audio books.” She shrugged, “To be honest, I don’t have a problem with him reading your story, there is so much sick porn out there, that your rather mild allusions to sex and the graphic descriptions of violence are nothing in comparison. I am enjoying the story, by the way, and Andy almost always listens in when I read it to the bairns.”

They spent a week in Colchester to stand in for Evelyn so that she could travel to Amsterdam for a wrestling match. Sam dismantled the 3D Printer and had it put into storage in Chichester. After Evelyn got back to Colchester, they drove to

Chichester and spent a week there. Sam decided his flat was too small for him and Ziggy. Ziggy persuaded him not to make any decisions for a while. They checked on Reg's old house in Bosham Hoe and Sam emailed Christine to let her know that he had managed to move all the models out and had removed the 3D Printer and tools that Reg had left to him. Christine wrote back thanking him and asking if he could put the house on the market, saying she needed the money for her treatment.

Two days later, Sam and Ziggy flew to Capetown. Christine was in the Oncology wing of the Groote Schuur hospital. She cried when Sam and Ziggy visited and told them she had hoped to get treated without any of her friends or family knowing she was sick. The type of cancer she had was rare and pernicious, and they were trying experimental treatments that were horribly expensive. Sam spoke with the consultant and agreed to pay for Christine's treatment. They stayed two nights at the Double Tree Hilton and then rented an apartment one of the Nurses told Ziggy about, in Newlands. Christine seemed to perk up after a week, Sam and Ziggy spent a couple of hours reading to her each day. Sam wrote two short stories, which covered the cost of Christine's treatment when Billie sold the film rights to the them.

Sam and Ziggy really liked Capetown, and spent many hours exploring. Christine had been born and lived in Capetown till she was fifteen. They visited many of the places she told them about.

Ziggy persuaded Sam to fly to New York for the Box Office launch of "Spirit Mountain," while she remained in Capetown so that she could visit Christine.

Sam flew back three days later via UK, where he collected Christine's parents and flew with them to Capetown after Ziggy had persuaded Christine to ask them to come and see her. Sam recognised Christine's father; he had been a teacher at Sam's high school, though he had never taught Sam.

The Leggats stayed for a week, during which time Christine made rapid progress. She was still half the weight she had been when she arrived. She was allowed out for a day and enjoyed a picnic in the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. A week later she was able to go up Table Mountain in a wheelchair. She improved steadily after that and moved into Sam and Ziggy's apartment three weeks later. Sam and Ziggy flew back to UK with her and drove her to her parents home in Tewkesbury.

Billie arranged a UK book signing tour, starting at Waterfords in Chichester. Sam was surprised at how many people came to get their books signed by him.

After three weeks they ended up in Haye on Wye, which Sam and Ziggy both loved. They spent a week there before returning exhausted to Chichester.

They were having lunch at The Café when the owner, a pretty, petite woman introduced herself and asked if he was the author Sam Botha. Sam admitted that he was and she asked if he had any promotional material that she could put up in the café. She said her best friend, Christine Leggat, had called and told her how Sam and Ziggy had literally saved her life. Laura cried and hugged them both. Ziggy called Billie and arranged for a display and some books to be delivered to the café, then called Sam over and pointed out an advert on the Café notice board. Half an hour later they were looking at a house close to the café, it had been Laura's great aunt's till she died and the family had decided to sell it. Sam agreed to buy it and asked if he could advertise his apartment on the Café notice board. Laura gave him the number of a conveyancer and the keys to the house, saying he could move in whenever he liked.

Sam left Ziggy organising the redecoration of the Franklin Place house while he flew to Toronto with Billie for a one week book

signing tour in Canada. From there they went to Tokyo and then Los Angeles to a Gamer Convention, where Sam spent a week signing caps, T-shirts, posters and a wide range of BlackBlade merchandising goods. The VR WyrnGuard game was earning obscene amounts of money and was hugely popular. Ziggy flew to Los Angeles for the last two days of the convention and told him that his apartment had been sold and everything, including the 3D Printer had been moved into the Franklin Place house.

Sam wanted to go back to UK, but Billie and Ziggy persuaded him to spend the money he would lose in taxes on travelling instead. Ziggy took charge and they spent six weeks travelling around the United States. Sam really liked Hawaii. They spent Christmas and New Year in Edinburgh, then flew to Capetown and stayed in a hotel for a week till Sam found a house in Hout Baai, that he bought in Ziggy's name. The house came with a double garage and a stable that Sam turned into a workshop.

Sam arranged for Ziggy to do a welding course at the Capetown Technical Institute and they designed and built a mobile home trailer and modified a Ford Transit to pull it with a fifth wheel that they imported from USA. It took them three months. They took it up to Mosselbaai, Wilderness and Knysna over Easter.

Ziggy fell pregnant; she was mortified. The doctors at the Newlands Clinic assured her that there was nothing to worry about, but she flew to UK for more tests. Sam was careful not to put any pressure on Ziggy who asked him to leave her with Myra while she had tests to make sure the baby would be alright.

“Ziggy, I love you,” he told her, “Whatever you decide I will respect, but I want you to be safe, that's the most important thing for me.”

Sam went to Colchester. The Abbey Fields project was, to all intents and purposes, complete. Dominic Paulson had resigned

and moved to Wales. Evelyn Jones was now the senior project manager of CCD. Her left arm was in a cast, but she still managed to lift Sam off his feet and squeeze him till he begged for mercy.

She kissed his cheek and thanked him for everything. He stayed a couple of nights with Maggie and Anne and told them that he was worried about Ziggy and why.

Christine called and asked if she could visit him. He said he was in Colchester and planning to go to Chichester and she offered to drive him there, saying she was nearby in Cambridge.

She collected him at midday. She had been at Addenbrookes Cancer Unit for a check up and was told she was still cancer free.

“I can never thank you enough, Sam,” she said, “You did more than save my life. Mum and Dad think the world of you too.”

“It makes me feel good to have been able to help,” said Sam, “I am sorry that you went through it, but I am so glad that you are OK.”

“I’m selling Reg’s house,” said Christine, “It’s too big for me, I’m going to open my own legal practice in Chichester, so if you ever need a lawyer ...”

“I’ll come straight to you,” said Sam.

She asked after Ziggy and when Sam told her the news she wanted to turn the car around and drive to Aberdeen. Instead she persuaded Sam to fly to Aberdeen and not leave Ziggy’s side, and drove him to Stansted

Andy collected Sam from the airport. He didn’t say much, but Sam sensed his excitement.

Ziggy was pleased to see him, they went for a walk and sat on a stone bench looking out over the sea while Ziggy told Sam that they were going to have a baby girl. She cried but said she was happy. She told him that Christine had called and told her that their child would be perfect, no matter what, because her parents were perfect.

They flew to Edinburgh and after telling Ziggy's parents the news they flew to Southampton and got a taxi to Chichester.

They spent six weeks in Chichester before flying back to Capetown, Ziggy wanted to have the baby there. Her parents came out and they spent five weeks driving up the coast to Namibia in their mobile home. Douglas and Mary thoroughly enjoyed it and flew back to UK from Walvis Bay. Sam persuaded Andy and Myra to fly out to Walvis Bay with their children. He hired a mobile home for them and they spent a month getting back to Hout Bay, where they had another two weeks before returning to UK.

Ziggy sold their mobile home and designed and started building a bigger one. It was finished in time for Christmas, when all of Ziggy's family flew out to Capetown. The children used the mobile home as a holiday home. Ziggy's bump looked impossibly big to Sam, and he had sleepless nights and acid attacks worrying about Ziggy. She went into labour early in the morning of new year's eve, her birthday, and at nine PM Maisie was delivered by Caesarean section. Sam cried shamelessly.

Ziggy stayed in hospital for three days, and said her swollen boobs hurt more than the C section. Maisie did her best to relieve the pressure. They held a proper birthday party for Ziggy on the fourth of January. Mary got quite tipsy and emotional. Bruce found a snake in the garden and carried it into the house, which caused a panic. Sam asked Bruce to put the snake down and it slithered under a chest of drawers. Sam ushered everybody out of the kitchen and after half an hour

coaxed the snake into an empty Pringles tube. Andy and Myra had checked every inch of Bruce and found no puncture wounds.

Sam calmed everybody down and suggested they drive to Cape Point to the reptile park and find out more about the snake. They called an Uber as they could not all fit into the VW van that they used to tow the mobile home. Andy drove, with Sam carrying the snake in the Pringles tube and Bruce, Jeni and Caithlin in the back. The rest went ahead in the Uber which got there long before the VW.

The snake turned out to be a juvenile Cape house snake, a non-venomous constrictor. The guide said they were really good at eating rats, but also ate other snakes and suggested that they take it back home with them. Ziggy readily agreed. They spent the afternoon at the reptile park. Everybody apart from Ziggy and Maisie handled snakes. There were ostriches there as well, which the children found fascinating.

Bruce asked if he could carry the snake on the way back. The guide had made holes in the Pringles lid and taped it down with duct tape and Bruce promised that he would not open the tube in the car.

Sid the snake was released in an overgrown corner of the garden by Bruce. It slid gracefully away without a backward glance.

“I don’t think I could ever be happier than I am right now,” said Ziggy that night when she climbed into bed.

Andy and Myra used the mobile home for a weekend trip to Mosselbaai with their children before flying back to UK. Douglas and Mary stayed with them for three months and flew back to UK with Ziggy and Maisie at the beginning of April.

Sam flew to New York for the launch of the Oliphant Plains TV series, Ziggy and Maisie joined him there, flying out with Katherine and Billie.

“Well Sam,” asked Katherine on the way back to their hotel after a celebratory dinner with the production staff and actors, “How does it feel to be a famous author?”

“It feels pretty good,” said Sam, “Especially now that I have a wonderful family to share life with. Thank you for helping me get here.”

“Do you think you will do any more writing?” asked Katherine.

Sam smiled and pulled a flash drive out of his pocket, “Here is something you can discuss with my agent,” he said, “The second part of the WyrnGuard Chronicles. Twelve books.”